

## **A WAY FORWARD FOR THE UK IN IRAQ**

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### **THE SITUATION IN IRAQ**

1. On 1 May 2003, President Bush stood on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq. Four years later and the country is in a state of bloody chaos. At least 70,000 Iraqi civilians – but likely many more – have been killed since the invasion, and hundreds of thousands have been injured or forced to flee their homes.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 3,500 US soldiers and several hundred other Coalition forces, including 150 British personnel, have also lost their lives.<sup>2</sup>
2. But even these shocking figures do not reveal the true horror of life for ordinary Iraqis.
3. There is a complex interplay of a Sunni insurgency, Shi'a militias and death squads, al-Qaida type terrorism and common criminality making violence a very real part of Iraqi life. Bombings and sectarian killings have become a daily occurrence in many parts of the country, particularly Baghdad. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, a third of the population now lives in poverty, food shortages and malnutrition are increasing and unemployment is rising rapidly. Water, sanitation and electricity infrastructure is close to collapse. Medical facilities are in an alarming state, with more than half Iraq's doctors having fled the country and those remaining risking murder or abduction.<sup>3</sup> According to Amnesty International, Iraq is now the world's fourth highest user of the death penalty (surpassed only by China, Iran and Pakistan), with many prisoners executed after 'confessing' under torture or following unfair trials.<sup>4</sup>
4. In short, the ongoing conflict in Iraq is causing immense suffering for a population that was already struggling with the effects of previous conflicts and years of sanctions. It is certainly not the beacon of democracy in the Middle East that the planners in Washington and London had hoped for.

### **A MORE DANGEROUS WORLD**

5. In global security terms, the invasion of Iraq has been a complete disaster.
6. The removal of Saddam Hussein was supposed to make the world a safer place by destroying Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, combating terrorism, and bringing greater stability to the Middle East. Firstly, there were no weapons of mass destruction. Secondly, Iraq now serves as a rallying call to radicalised individuals and groups across the world and the country itself has become a combat training zone for paramilitaries who will be able, in due course, to apply their experience and capabilities in other areas of jihadist operations in the region and further afield. Thirdly, It has greatly added to instability in the Middle East, the repercussions of which will be felt for decades, not

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<sup>1</sup> Iraq Body Count, [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org).

<sup>2</sup> Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, <http://icasualties.org/oif/>.

<sup>3</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Civilians Without Protection: The Ever-worsening Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq* (April 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, *Unjust and Unfair: The Death Penalty in Iraq* (20 April 2007).

years – as that is how long it is likely to take to ‘defeat’ the insurgency, if indeed it can ever be defeated.

7. It is clear that the invasion and occupation of Iraq has not made the world a safer place and, in fact, polls reveal that most countries believe that it has made the world more, not less, dangerous.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it has without a doubt diverted attention and resources away from other, much more serious, security issues.

#### **FOUR MORE YEARS?**

8. The current ‘surge’ of more than 20,000 US troops may have initially contributed to decreasing communal violence in Baghdad, but it has resulted in an increase in insurgent activity in other parts of the country. It also did little, for example, to stop the recent suicide attack on the Iraqi Parliament in the heart of the Green Zone; the truck bomb which collapsed the Al-Sarafiyah bridge into the Tigris, killing 10 people; or the four bombs that killed 183 people in Baghdad in a single day.
9. The three violent examples cited above all occurred within the space of one week, from 12 to 19 April. It should be clear to all by now that policies in Iraq simply are not working, and it is highly unlikely that the current troop surge will be able to stem the violence.
10. In response, many commentators have been calling for an immediate withdrawal of Coalition forces. The argument is that no matter what the consequences of a withdrawal, the Coalition presence is only making the security situation worse and is helping to fuel the insurgency.
11. It is a strong argument – particularly as every new incidence of wrongful arrest, abuse or unlawful killing fans the flames of resentment already felt towards what is seen by many as an occupying force. However, the UK government claims that withdrawal would: 1) precipitate a civil war, leaving the fate of the country to be decided by violence; 2) result in Iraq becoming a failed state and a haven for al-Qaida; and 3) damage the UK’s “national interests” and international credibility by handing a victory to the terrorists.
12. These arguments are spurious. Iraq is essentially already in a civil war and, as argued above, terrorists are gaining valuable experience in urban combat in what is turning out to be a far more effective training ground than Afghanistan ever was. Furthermore, withdrawal in the face of resistance or insurgency has happened before: the French withdrew their troops from Algeria in 1962 and the US withdrew from Vietnam in 1973 and Lebanon in 1984. In all three examples, neither country’s national interests or international credibility were damaged beyond repair.<sup>6</sup> However, by staying in Iraq, this is the very fate the UK is facing.
13. To date, 17 countries which had troops in or supported operations in Iraq at some point have pulled out, with Poland, Denmark and possibly Lithuania expected to also withdraw later this year. The US has by far the largest number of troops still in Iraq, and although the US State Department lists some 25 additional countries with forces in the country, of those it is only the UK providing a military force which makes a real difference in operational capability. This places the UK in a somewhat unique position.

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<sup>5</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, *America's Image Slips, But Allies Share US Concerns Over Iran, Hamas* (June 2006), <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252>.

<sup>6</sup> Lt. Gen. Robert Gard (Ret.) and Brig. Gen. John H. Johns (Ret.), *There are risks if the US withdraws its troops from Iraq. Are there greater risks in keeping them there?* (Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, November 2005).

14. The government has said for some time that British troops will be withdrawn from Iraq when Iraqi forces are capable of maintaining security on their own. This argument does have certain seductive qualities, but it increasingly sounds like an open-ended commitment with no end in sight – particularly as it presupposes that there is a military solution to the violence in Iraq, when experience indicates that this is clearly not the case.
15. It is obviously important to understand what the Iraqi people want. Unfortunately, polling data on this issue is a little inconsistent. However, a poll carried out in March 2007 for several major media outlets, including the BBC, showed that 82% of Iraqis had little or no confidence in the US and UK occupation forces and 78% opposed the presence of those forces in Iraq. There was, though, a fairly even split between those wanting Coalition forces to leave Iraq immediately and those wanting them to remain until security is restored.<sup>7</sup>

## **A POSITIVE WAY FORWARD**

16. However, the choice is not simply between “stay the course” or “cut and run”. The countries responsible for the invasion of Iraq cannot simply leave the Iraqi people to their fate. While they may not be a part of the solution, they have a grave responsibility to support the Iraqi government and the United Nations in finding a way to ensure the long-term security of Iraq.
17. There is a problem though. Following President Bush’s rejection of the bi-partisan Iraq Study Group report, many in the political, media, academic and think tank communities seem to have accepted that nothing can be done, that there is little point in suggesting ways forward for Iraq because they will simply be ignored. But this is no argument for doing nothing – those of us in countries such as the UK have a moral imperative to repeatedly point out the failure of current policies and suggest alternative ways forward.
18. Furthermore, the UK government does have a choice. The forthcoming change of Prime Minister offers the opportunity for a break with the past. This is why initiatives such as the Iraq Commission are so important at this juncture. The government may be able to do little to influence US policy for the better, but it must now develop and implement its own policies for withdrawal from Iraq.
19. Such policies need to recognise three realities:
  - a. Mistakes have been made and the UK has played a central role in helping to create the current situation in Iraq.
  - b. There is currently no military solution to the violence in Iraq, and the presence of Coalition troops is likely to be fuelling the insurgency.
  - c. The UK only has a limited ability to influence US, or indeed Iraqi, approaches to the conflict.
20. It is important to take these points into account if we are to propose policies that have a realistic hope of working within the current environment. So, with that in mind, UK policies might include the following four proposals:
  - a. The withdrawal of UK combat troops.
  - b. Assistance to the Iraqi military and security services.
  - c. Support for the rebuilding of Iraq.
  - d. An apology for the mistakes that have been made.

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<sup>7</sup> D3 Systems, *Iraq: Where Things Stand* (March 2007), [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/19\\_03\\_07\\_iraqpollnew.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/19_03_07_iraqpollnew.pdf).

21. **The withdrawal of UK combat troops.** There should be a rapid withdrawal of UK combat troops from Iraq. This should be linked to political and financial support for a UN or regional stabilisation force, but should not be dependent on such a force. The withdrawal should be carried out in discussion with the Iraqi government and the governments of other countries with troops in Iraq, but should not be delayed because of this. If withdrawal was successful, this might act as an example to the US and those few other countries with combat troops still in Iraq.
22. **Assistance to the Iraqi military and security services.** In place of combat troops, the UK should continue to provide training, intelligence and financial support to the Iraqi military and security services for a fixed period of time, agreed in advance with the Iraqi government (in the region of 12 months for training and intelligence and 48 months for finance). The level of commitment should steadily decrease over this agreed timeframe. Any UK military personnel remaining in Iraq should serve only as instructors and advisers, with a minimum number of support troops providing interim force protection. This agreement should be reviewed on a regular basis by the British and Iraqi Parliaments.
23. **Support for the rebuilding of Iraq.** The UK government should begin a programme of massive and sustained aid and technical support for the reconstruction of Iraq. This should be unconditional and should not be in the form of loans. Fair compensation, administered by local committees and civil society organisations, should also be paid to civilians who have lost family members, property or livelihoods as a result of UK military action, and specific support should be offered to those people who have been displaced by the conflict.
24. **An apology for the mistakes that have been made.** The new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, should hold a press conference – in Iraq if possible – at which a public apology is issued for the mistakes made during the invasion and occupation. At the same time a firm commitment should be made to the Iraqi people that the UK will not interfere in internal Iraqi affairs. Some may, mistakenly, view this as handing a victory to the terrorists, but there can be no moving forward without at least a recognition of the past.
25. There may not be full agreement with all of the above proposals. However, the important task at this point in time is to continue to publicly debate our involvement in Iraq and support the UK government in developing effective policies for the withdrawal of troops.

## CONCLUSION

26. There are no guarantees of success in Iraq; but that does not absolve us of our responsibility to develop and propose positive ways out of the current fiasco.
27. There can be little doubt that UK forces must now withdraw from the country, but withdrawal alone is not enough. With the situation in Iraq deteriorating and the forthcoming change of leadership in the UK, it is now time for the British government to develop and implement a new Iraq strategy. However, they must first understand that there are ways of withdrawing troops from Iraq that will not necessarily result in disaster. The proposals outlined in this submission may have the potential to form part of such a strategy that offers a way forward.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

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