Resolving Iraq: Progress depends on a
short timeline for US troop withdrawal

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The Bush administration's misadventure in Iraq constitutes a splendid catastrophe – "splendid" in the sense of being manifest, multifaceted, and profound. It is the strategic equivalent of Katrina, but man-made. Born of disinformation, it has – at great cost in lives, money, and prestige – spawned anti-Americanism, civil war, and a surge in terrorism.{1} Failing to see this is dangerous. Even more dangerous is mistaking the malady for the cure – which is precisely what President Bush has done with his "troop surge" proposal.

Operation Iraqi Freedom is not the type of folly that one can fix by staying the course. Nor can it be fixed by putting more shoulders to the wheel. Indeed, we cannot truly fix this disaster at all – not without recourse to time travel. However, we can begin to repair the damage. And it is worth remembering that the United States and its armed forces rebounded relatively quickly from the Vietnam War debacle.

What is most important now is to recognize as bankrupt the Bush administration's crusader vision – its notions of coercive transformation. We must see and set a distinctly new course, beginning with Iraq.

Out of Iraq

Iraq's best hope for peace resides in a quick withdrawal of almost all US military forces from the country and their replacement by a new and smaller multinational force. "Quick" and "almost all" means a reduction to no more than a few thousand US troops by mid-March 2008 – the fifth anniversary of the war's onset. Between now and then, the emphasis should shift to training Iraqi forces, redefining the security mission, and handing it off to the new international coalition.

Those few US troops remaining in Iraq after March 2008 should constitute a minority contingent within a multinational security assistance mission comprised principally of participants from Arab and Muslim nations. The United States might also maintain a deterrent force in the region (but outside Iraq) comprising a ground force component of no more than 15,000 soldiers and marines (including those afloat).

Iraq will continue to need substantial external assistance and support. However, a new multinational framework is essential. The current one – which rests on US military power and entails American predominance in key areas of Iraqi life and governance – is provocative and untenable. The Iraqi government will continue to suffer legitimacy problems until it becomes fully disentangled from the American mission.

A new framework of international support should be formed under the auspices of the UN Security Council (UNSC) with separate sections addressing governance, development, and security.   This framework should incorporate and supersede all bilateral efforts.   New security efforts, in particular, should centrally involve Iraq's neighbors.

Until these changes occur, "nationalist" and "rejectionist" sentiments and elements in both the Sunni and Shia communities will continue to prompt violence in Iraq, including cycles of communal conflict.   By contrast, the international community – specifically, the Security Council and a consortium of Iraq's neighbor -- might use the prospect of US withdrawal as a lever to move Iraq's communities toward a new national compact.

The proposed approach constitutes a fundamental departure from the current failed course. Despite the risks it entails, it offers a last and best hope for stabilizing Iraq and substantiating its representative system of government.

For the United States, the proposed course assumes a devolution of its near-term goals for Iraq to the following: a unified, fully-sovereign, and fairly stable Iraq, possessing a representative form of government and posing no aggressive threat to its neighbors. We must set aside, for now, the goals of establishing in Iraq a model free-market economy uniquely open to globalization, or of marginalizing pan-Arab nationalist and Islamist ideologies, or of creating a base and a partner for efforts at regional transformation. All these things might be accomplished in the future, but only by means other than military occupation. One additional goal served by withdrawal and stabilization would be a reduction in the flow of terrorist volunteers. Al Qaeda would lose its principal recruiting tool.

The present approach is untenable

As early as Fall 2005, some coalition military leaders began to publicly affirm that the coalition's presence in Iraq was "part of the problem."{2} In fact, it is – or has become -- the determinate part.

That the American presence and mission are untenable should be clear from the fact that Iraqis readily blame the coalition, directly or indirectly, for most of their current difficulties, including the rise in communal violence and crime.{3} A September 2006 poll of Iraqi public opinion found that 79 percent of Iraqis think the United States is having a mostly negative effect on the country; 78 percent think that the US military is provoking more conflict than it is preventing.{4} A "hearts and minds" campaign cannot be won under these circumstances.

Especially in Sunni and Shia areas – where US troops mostly operate – Iraqis do not trust the coalition and want US troops to leave soon. The September 2006 poll found 71 percent of all Iraqis favoring withdrawal by September 2007. Among Sunnis the proportion wanting withdrawal was 91 percent; among Shia, 74 percent.

Most disturbing, support among Iraqis for attacks on coalition forces registered at 61 percent in the September 2006 poll -- up from 47 percent in January 2006. Among Shia, support for

attacks is 62 percent; among Sunnis, 92 percent. A September 2006 poll for the Defense Department found somewhat lower levels of support for the attacks, but still quite disturbing: 75 percent of Sunnis supported them – up from 14 percent in 2003.{5} An October 2006 poll by the British Ministry of Defense found similar results.{6} And a January 2005 poll by Zogby International found that 53 percent of Sunnis supported attacks on US troops at that time.{7}

Generally speaking, Iraqi sentiments regarding the US presence have grown steadily more negative since the summer of 2003.{8} And US military operations – ranging from routine patrols and raids to major offensives and city sieges – seem only to further alienate Iraqi opinion.{9}

Key aspects of an effective alternative

The power and appeal of "rejectionism" among Sunnis and Shia alike derive from the fact of the American occupation. The negative aura that surrounds the American presence also touches and tarnishes the Iraqi government, which is presently dependent on American power. And, because that government is dominated by Kurdish and Shia parties, the impression that it is "collaborationist" feeds communal tensions.

The key to ending civil conflict in Iraq and stabilizing the country is integration of the Sunni community into the political process as a full partner. Also essential is the fuller integration of the various Shia "Sadrist" trends.   The occupation puts these goals out of reach. It makes it impossible to integrate the more "nationalist" of the Sunni insurgent groups. It also creates a base of support among Sunnis for Al Qaeda-linked terrorists. These latter are principally responsible for the mass attacks on Shia community, which drive the cycle of communal violence.

With regard to integrating Sunnis: what is most important is the co-option of "rejectionist" elements – especially recalcitrant tribal groups and those indigenous insurgents not affiliated with Al Qaeda franchise groups. Desired immediate outcomes would be a substantial reduction in attacks on coalition forces, strong local cooperation in suppressing the activity of Al Qaeda-affiliated groups, and an end to terrorist assaults on the Shia community.   Another near-term objective would be a *quid pro quo* "cease-fire" on the part of Sadrists and other Shia militants who target Sunnis.

To draw Sunnis into the new order it is essential that there be:

- A timeline for the near-term withdrawal of almost all US troops, occurring in phases commencing almost immediately;

- An end to the de-Baathification campaign; (Former regime officials formally charged with gross abuses of human rights might be prosecuted on an individual basis.)

- A full amnesty for all indigenous insurgents and militia not charged with intentionally doing grave harm to noncombatant civilians; and,

- A return to local Sunni authority in Sunni locales, including the formation of local security units.

Winning the assent of Shia parties to some of these provisions will be difficult – although the Sadrists and some Dawa leaders will welcome a timeline for US withdrawal. Here, the role of Iraq's neighbors – especially Iran – and mediating organizations, such as the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, will be pivotal.

Overcoming resistance and moving all Iraqi parties toward a "new beginning" for Iraq will depend on the political momentum gained from the prospect of US troop withdrawal, a reassertion of Iraqi sovereignty, a new national compact among Iraq's communities, and regional cooperation in securing Iraq's borders and reducing intercommunal tensions.

Winning the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors will require that some of their key security concerns be addressed. In the case of Syria and Iran, a de-escalation of other contentious issues is essential. Our disagreements with these states must come out from under the imminent threat of war.

The new security mission in Iraq

The new security mission should be under UN auspices and founded on a consortium of states including all of Iraq's neighbors and the permanent members of the Security Council. The central involvement of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran will allow for better control of external influences on the Iraqi security environment and will add powerful new capacities to influence decision-making in the Iraqi Shia and Sunni communities.

Iraq's Sunni and Shia neighbors can play a unique and pivotal role in stabilizing Iraq by cooperating to end intercommunal strife. And the United States should facilitate this cooperation.

On the ground, foreign advisors and troops may serve to train and assist indigenous forces as well as monitor military developments. In some areas, they may share primary responsibility for security. US and UK troops, however, should constitute only a small minority of the foreign contingent, mostly serving in support capacities.

Most of the foreign military personnel inside Iraq, and all of those serving as front-line troops, should come from Arab-speaking and Muslim states -- preferably from states noncontiguous with Iraq. For instance: Egypt, Morocco, the UAE, and Oman together should be able to deploy 60,000 ground troops, if supported. (Several of them together deployed nearly this many for the 1991 Gulf War. In aggregate, their ground forces are larger than America's.) Military and police training and development efforts might draw from a broader roster.

Of course, any new international force in Iraq should operate under a clear status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government.

As a confidence-building measure, all states participating in the security mission should agree to forego unilateral security-related efforts in Iraq. Instead, all efforts should be channeled through the international mission. Moreover, Iraq and its neighbors should agree to exchange substantial "military observer" missions.

Conclusion: Plan B

The proposed alternative depends on the willingness of Iraq's political leadership to risk a new course. There is no guarantee that they will assent. Should they reject the path outlined above, however, they will have foreclosed the possibility of stabilizing the country any time soon. Continuing the US mission under such a limitation would be counter-productive and contrary to American interests.

Should Iraq's leaders decide to foreclose the hope of progress, the United States should withdraw its current mission and assume a regional posture that aims to contain and manage the effluent from a distance. A deepening of Iraqi civil conflict might ensue – at least for a time – or it might not. Either way, a large-scale US military occupation of indefinite duration is not a cost-effective way of hedging against this eventuality. Air, naval, and ground force deployments outside Iraq comprising 50,000 personnel would comprise a very substantial deterrent and rapid response capability – should the preferred course as outlined above prove impracticable. In addition, regional diplomacy should address a "Plan B" contingency, so that concerned nations might coordinate their responses and minimize the possibility of a broader war. Concerned nations should also make provisions for humanitarian relief and the care of refugees.

Seeing our way clear of the Iraq disaster and avoiding similar debacles in the future requires that US national leadership reject the war's originating error: the conviction that one nation might easily compel profound political, economic, and social transition in another at the point of a gun.

Notes

1. A cost benefit analysis of the operation with an addendum summarizing its effects on terrorism can be found in: Carl Conetta, *Pyrrhus on the Potomac: How America's post-9/11 wars have undermined US national security,* Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Report #18 (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 5 September 2006).

2. "Government stunned by Army chief's Iraq blast," *Daily Mail,* 13 October 2006; Sean Rayment, "All British soldiers to be out of Iraq in 12 months," *Telegraph,* 8 March 2006; Mark Mazzetti, "Generals conclude U.S. troops foster insurgency in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times,* 1 October 2005; and, Sean Rayment, "British commanders condemn US military tactics," *The Age,* 12 April 2004.

3. Jill Carroll, "Ordinary Iraqis bear brunt of war," *Christian Science Monitor,* 15 April 2005, p. 6; Jack Fairweather, "Iraqis blame US for bomb attacks on army recruits," *News Telegraph,* 2 December 2004; Joseph L. Galloway, Jonathan S. Landay, Warren P. Strobel and John Walcott, "Blunders worsened

America's problems in Iraq," *Knight Ridder,* 18 October 2004; and, Ian Fisher, "As Iraqis Become the Targets of Terrorists, Some Now Blame the American Mission," *New York Times,* 17 December 2003.

4. Program on International Policy Attitudes, *The Iraqi Public on the US Presence and the Future of Iraq* (Washington DC: PIPA, 27 September2006); http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/sep06/Iraq_Sep06_rpt.pdf

5. John Simpson, "Iraq engulfed by tide of violence," *BBC News,* 22 September 2006; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5371394.stm

6. Sean Rayment, "Secret MoD poll: Iraqis Support Attacks on British Troops," *Sunday Telegraph,* 23 October 2005.

7. *Survey Finds Deep Divisions in Iraq; Sunni Arabs Overwhelmingly Reject Sunday Elections; Majority of Sunnis, Shiites Favor U.S. Withdrawal, New Abu Dhabi TV - Zogby Poll Reveals* (Utica, NY: Zogby International, 28 January 2005); http://www.zogby.com/news/ReadNews.dbm?ID=957

8. Carl Conetta, *What do Iraqis want? Iraqi attitudes on occupation, US withdrawal, governments, and quality of life* (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 1 February 2005); http://www.comw.org/pda/0501br17append.html

9. The problems posed by military occupation and the effects of US military operations on Iraqi public opinion are explored in detail in: Carl Conetta, *Vicious Circle: The Dynamics of Occupation and Resistance in Iraq, Part One. Patterns of Popular Discontent,* PDA Research Monograph #10 (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 18 May 2005); http://www.comw.org/pda/0505rm10.html