

The Way Forward in Iraq

It is in our nation's security and economic interests to begin to change our strategy in Iraq and initiate a plan for a responsible military disengagement. We have lost 3,530 lives to military operations in Iraq. We have spent over \$378 billion plus the funds that were appropriated in the most recent supplemental bill. Our national debt is rising and our government is being forced to abandon critical domestic priorities. Our public image to the world has deteriorated drastically and continues to suffer. If we proceed on the current path, we will endanger our nation's long-term competitiveness and well-being. Moreover, political realities in Washington will force change. As we approach the 2008 presidential election campaign, the people of the United States may choose to elect a President that promises an immediate withdrawal. This could be very dangerous for the region and American national security interests. Therefore, it is time to deal with the realities – the inevitability of our eventual disengagement – and begin the planning for a new way forward in Iraq.

Military Disengagement Does Not Equal Abandonment

It is absolutely critical that we avoid being forced into a precipitous withdrawal, whether it is because of world events or our own political atmosphere at home. The dangers of a precipitous withdrawal include the potential destabilization of the region; the disintegration of United States relations with various allies in the region; the endangerment of vital energy supplies in the Middle East; and irreparable damage to the credibility of the United States throughout the world (especially if we leave and a humanitarian crisis ensues). If we lose the opportunity to implement a responsible military disengagement on our own terms, we may find ourselves unable to prevent the aforementioned dangers. Therefore, we must formulate a strategy for disengagement that seeks to prevent these outcomes and protect our long-term, strategic interests in the region.

While our men and women in the field courageously fight day in and day out, complex power struggles in the region and among Iraq's religious sects and political factions continue to undermine American troops. Iraq's elected government has not yet proved capable of forging a political reconciliation and winning the support

of these groups. Following the second attack on a Shiite shrine in Samarra, Iraq's government has grown increasingly nervous as political factions split even further. Shiites are now fighting with Shiites in neighborhoods that were previously calm. According to the testimony of numerous experts and officials who have testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee, Iraq's problems cannot be solved with a military solution alone. Rather, Iraq's future rests largely on political solutions within the Iraqi government, its perceived leaders and Iraq's neighboring countries where American influence is limited. Currently, the only leverage we have to influence these actors and trigger political cooperation is through the presence and/or removal of our military forces from Iraq.

Unfortunately, the presence of American forces in Iraq is being exploited by Iraq's political actors, religious sects, and militias, as well as al Qaeda, other foreign fighters, and Iraq's neighboring countries. Their leaders are not moving quickly to make responsible decisions and change the situation, because the continued presence of American forces fuel their arguments and make compromise unnecessary. Therefore, our best chance of stabilizing Iraq is to develop and implement a strategy for United States military disengagement that is coupled with a robust diplomatic effort to contain instability and protect our interests in the region. It is time the Iraqi government and its regional neighbors take a greater responsibility in stabilizing this situation. Military disengagement is the only way to force Iraq's leaders and neighboring countries to make the difficult decisions needed to create stability and prevent a catastrophe in the region. Only by initiating such a strategy can we hope to achieve all of the following goals:

- * Compel Iraq's leaders and neighbors to take actions that will support stability in Iraq and prevent chaos in the region;

- * Make al Qaeda's mission to drive out U.S. forces obsolete, so Iraqi tolerance for al Qaeda decreases;

- * Stop terrorist networks from using Iraq's perceived occupation as a recruitment tool;

- * Develop a plan for Iraq that can be endorsed by all of Iraq's neighbors and key international organizations;
- * Agree on a timeline for disengagement that is acceptable to the people of Iraq, blessed by the international community, and easier to implement because it has their support;
- * Protect key American alliances in the region by working with them to develop our exit strategy and working to address their fears and concerns;
- * Preserve American credibility by staying involved in Iraq and focusing more energy on refugee assistance, humanitarian aid, and reconstruction aid;
- * Focus our resources on other fronts in the war on terrorism; and
- * Rest and repair our military forces for potential future conflicts.

Military disengagement cannot be viewed as an abandonment of Iraq or our long-term strategic interests in the region. If we pursue a well-developed and comprehensive plan for withdrawing U.S. forces, we will have a better chance of achieving our goals and sustaining domestic support for a continued commitment in the future. Drawing out our current efforts indefinitely will deplete our resources and limit our options when we eventually decide to draw down our forces. By forming the strategy now, we have time on our side and can mitigate the possible negative consequences of our departure.

What is the Way Forward?

A Clear Announcement and a Clear Commitment

The United States should begin by issuing a clear announcement about the intention to responsibly withdraw our military forces from Iraq, while stressing our commitment to remain engaged in Iraq's future and the future stability of the Middle East. The statement should and must go hand in hand with a demonstration of our decision, to ensure that it is taken seriously. The demonstration

could be to draw back a significant number of our forces to major military garrisons or to redeploy them to forward operating bases in neighboring countries. The goal would be to reduce our visible presence, while sustaining our ability to respond immediately to any serious crisis or attack on U.S. soldiers or installations.

The announcement should also be coupled with an expression of our commitment to Iraq's future and our determination to stay involved in the region and prevent its destabilization. We must make clear that our decision to leave is based on a desire to bring an end to the violence, to force out foreign fighters, and to allow Iraqis to reclaim their country from terrorists and militants. We must also emphasize that we will come to Iraq's assistance if asked, and that we will remain in the region to assist our other allies as well.

Lastly, we should make clear our pledge to provide Iraq with our financial and humanitarian assistance for the next several years, including a special program for assisting refugees who have left Iraq and refugees who want to return to Iraq when the violence stops. Prior to the announcement, we should have a plan in place to resettle a portion of Iraqi refugees in the United States, especially those who helped U.S. forces as linguists, informants, or in other ways.

An International Conference and Shuttle Diplomacy

Military disengagement must go hand-in-hand with a plan for robust diplomatic engagement aimed at preventing instability and leveraging Iraq's neighbors to help us prevent chaos in the region. On the multilateral front, the United States should organize an international conference to bring together Iraq's neighbors, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and the UN Secretary General. The purpose of the conference would be to discuss how to maintain stability in the Middle East, manage the refugee crisis, and forge a new political compact in Iraq that will address key political issues in Iraq, including resource allocation, de-Baathification, and reconciliation. The conference should aim to produce an agreement among its participants and a subsequent UN Security Council Resolution. The agreement should establish agreement on a number of important issues, including respect for Iraq's sovereignty and its current borders, and any arrangement to

provide an international peacekeeping force if sectarian conflict leads to a humanitarian crisis.

On the margins of the international conference, the United States should conduct a series of focused bilateral meetings with Iraq's leadership, our allies, and Iraq's neighbors. The meetings should address specific concerns, including cooperation to control Iraq's borders and cooperation to prevent retaliatory attacks on U.S. soldiers upon withdrawal. We should make clear that any coordinated attack on U.S. soldiers would be responded to with speed and severity.

A Substantial Package of Foreign Aid

The way forward and out of Iraq will require a substantial aid package for Iraq. This is an important step and will send a clear message that we intend to keep our promise to the Iraqis and help stabilize their country. We will also need to provide foreign aid to key partners in the region, such as Jordan and Kuwait, who will be impacted strategically and economically by military disengagement. This must include refugee assistance and increased economic and security assistance to help them deal with the thousands of Iraqi refugees and manage security at their borders. It is a sign of goodwill that advances U.S. interests by helping to protect our partnerships and prevent the spread of instability through the region. Though some may balk at the expense of foreign aid to Iraq or other partners, it is only a fraction of the costs of sustaining war operations.

Sustain U.S. Credibility and Bolster Public Diplomacy

As a final and critical component of any plan for military disengagement, we must find ways to restore our credibility and standing in the world. The war in Iraq was a major blow to our soft power and public diplomacy. It cannot be rebuilt overnight, but steps should be taken to prevent the further deterioration of our image in the aftermath of a withdrawal. First, we should follow up our disengagement from Iraq with an announcement of our commitment to remain involved in the greater fight against terrorism and to engage more heavily in Afghanistan and the Global War on Terrorism. We should devote more resources to strangling terrorist financial networks, promoting international law

enforcement cooperation, and ridding countries of dangerous Madrassas that train terrorists. Second, we should give a visible priority to the Middle East Peace Process and our relations with all countries in the Middle East. We must show that our disengagement from Iraq does not represent an abandonment of our commitment to stabilize the Greater Middle East. Third, we should pursue a significant foreign aid program that will draw attention to the United States' good works and involvement in the world. This could begin with our commitment to pay the full amount of our current outstanding dues to the UN for international peacekeeping and other arrears, which would send a powerful message to the world and bolster the American image tremendously.

Conclusion

I believe that we can set our nation on a new course in Iraq that has bipartisan support in Congress and sustains our commitment to the people of Iraq. We can share more of the responsibility with Iraqis and their neighbors, while protecting our vital interests. We must begin the process now. The United States is a powerful and principled nation, and we are entering just one more phase of our nation's history. Our courage and resolve can carry us through this experience and into a new phase of global leadership.