

## Reality Bites: The Impending Logic of Withdrawal from Iraq

Despite the Iraq war's complexities, the arguments made and policy options proposed in discussing this issue have been remarkably limited and largely confined to a U.S.-centered framework. The realities of Iraq are all too often neglected, misunderstood, or ignored. Indeed, the basic conception both of the Bush administration and of its most bitter opponents regarding the situation in Iraq is inaccurate and increasingly disastrous. The ruling premise in Washington is that, by staying the course, maintaining a large-scale U.S. presence, defeating the insurgents, and strengthening an elected government, it is possible to achieve both stability and a large measure of democracy in Iraq. Critics of these policies assert that the U.S. government is mishandling Iraq's problems or perhaps should not be dealing with them at all. Yet whether U.S. policy has been working or failing, the present situation in Iraq demands a new U.S. approach for the future.

If the current strategy fails and anarchy deepens, both the new Iraqi leaders and Washington will call for a reduction in the U.S. role. If it succeeds, at least by putting a strong, freely elected Iraqi government in power, this new regime will still likely insist on a substantial and perhaps complete U.S. withdrawal from the country within a reasonable time period. Either way, there is little reason to expect that a peacefully negotiated resolution of Iraq's power struggle is going to end the violence in the near future or create a situation in which U.S. troops are going to be welcome indefinitely. The insurgents are not going to give up and in fact may well escalate their battle as a Shi'a-ruled Iraq seems inevitable. The government is going to want to assert its sovereignty and set its own strategy for fighting the civil war. Only a test of arms will decide the country's future course.

---

Barry Rubin is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center of the Interdisciplinary University in Herzliya, Israel, and editor of the *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA).

---

© 2005 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 28:2 pp. 67–80.

Such an inevitable, violent outcome can have one of two results for Washington. If the war goes on endlessly or if the Iraqi government wins it through ruthless repression and the killing of thousands of people, the world will hold the United States responsible. If a regime emerges from the insurgency that the United States has tried desperately to defeat, the United States would face a catastrophic loss of credibility and will have made a new enemy in Iraq for decades to come. The United States must therefore decide which political forces it wants to support in Iraq and begin planning its exit strategy. Although the United States should not pull its forces out quickly and rashly, it would be prudent to withdraw from Iraq sometime during the next 12–18 months, after a new Iraqi constitution is drafted and a new round of elections—planned for December 2005—chooses a permanent government.

### **Mistaken Assumptions**

---

During the 2004 presidential campaign, President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) found common ground when it came to U.S. policy toward Iraq, agreeing that U.S. troops should remain until the Iraqis had established a stable government, violent extremists had been defeated, and the United States had proven its credibility. Although this seems to be a responsible stance, is it really the correct one?

In fact, this bipartisan strategy is based on five basic assumptions that seem logical in principle but do not apply to the situation on the ground in Iraq in practice. First, current strategy presumes that an extended U.S. and coalition presence will help consolidate Iraq's government by ensuring stability, reconstruction, and the decisive defeat of radical forces. Second, U.S. steadfastness would win the Iraqi people's favor who, when they see democracy advancing and their living standards rising, would then support their new government, express gratitude to the United States, and turn their backs on the insurgents. Third, U.S. military operations would buy time for the Iraqis to build up an indigenous army capable of fighting the war within Iraq, the existence of which would allow the coalition to reduce the size and activity of foreign forces, leading to fewer casualties and greater acceptance—within Iraq, the Arab world, Europe, and domestically—of the U.S. presence. Fourth, the U.S. armed forces could contain and defeat the insurgents, reducing their ability to destabilize Iraq and slow reconstruction. Finally, the United States can best encourage democracy and stability within Iraq by remaining neutral toward its domestic politics.

Unfortunately, none of these propositions are likely to be effective in Iraq, at least from this point forward. In fact, an elected Iraqi government

will want to phase out the presence of coalition troops and reduce U.S. political leverage for a number of reasons. Rather than viewing the U.S. presence as a factor promoting the country's stability and unity, the new government will want to prove its independence and nationalism by securing the coalition's departure. Rather than welcoming U.S. influence as a means to achieve democracy, Iraq's new leaders will want to prevent U.S. interference in cases where Baghdad might decide to violate human rights, democracy, and honest governing practices. They will seek this outcome both out of selfishness—desiring to keep power and enjoy the material benefits of office—and a belief that only such methods will assure their self-preservation and effective governance. Finally, rather than view U.S. forces as their protectors, Iraq's new leaders will want to ensure that U.S. policy does not restrict their ability to employ the brutal methods they are going to deem necessary to destroy the insurgency.

**The United States has failed to set a clear time frame for withdrawal.**

Leaders of Iraq's most powerful political party have made their intentions clear. As Ahmad Chalabi, the exiled Iraqi politician whom the United States had once apparently designated as Iraq's new leader, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on December 22, 2004, "The first task of the newly elected provisional parliament must be to reach agreement with the United States to determine the status of their forces in Iraq and agree on a timetable for a phased withdrawal."<sup>1</sup> Chalabi was not calling for a sudden, irresponsible withdrawal, but rather a carefully planned, gradual one.

The reality is that maintaining a large-scale U.S. presence to create a post-Saddam government is neither sustainable nor desirable. Despite U.S. assumptions, a protracted U.S.-led war in Iraq will not win over the people, assure stability, or defeat insurgents. On the contrary, it will have the opposite effect. The United States must therefore now shift gears and prepare to withdraw after an Iraqi government is initially established following the December 2005 Iraqi elections. This stands in contrast to previous plans to stay for as long as it took to turn Iraq into an ideal democracy or even to maintain large bases there for the long-term future. Although withdrawing will undoubtedly leave many U.S. leaders and some members of the public somewhat dissatisfied, it will also provide an opportunity to declare victory in reasonable terms and bring the troops home. The alternative is to see the mission of U.S. forces held hostage by Iraq's governmental instability or even to sustain a permanent presence, a scenario that will result in a disaster far greater than the problems confronted up to now.

### DISREGARDING IRAQI POLITICAL REALITIES

Although a true democracy in the Middle East has been touted as the rhetorical goal by the United States, political actors in Iraq are focused on such issues as surviving, gaining power, ensuring the dominance of their communal group, defeating their enemies by any means necessary, and obtaining material benefits. In the absence of moderate, democratic interest groups, the political gap has been filled by religious and communal organizations that have their own objectives, unrelated to democracy. The most powerful political force in Iraq, the United Iraqi Alliance, was assembled by the elder-

**P**olitical actors in Iraq are not focused on democracy.

ly Ayatollah Ali Sistani and is committed to establishing a Shi'a-dominated, Islamic-oriented—though not radical—regime. In exchange for their future cooperation, the Alliance (representing the Shi'a, which make up about 55 percent of the Iraqi population) has offered the Kurds (about 20 percent) de facto local autonomy. On the basis of such a policy, the United Iraqi Alliance could form

the foundation for a nonradical, stable state that would be reasonably favorable to U.S. interests. It would not, however, form a fully democratic government as, for example, women's rights are likely to suffer under an Islamic-oriented regime. Nor is this a likely formula for internal peace because the Sunni Muslims, comprising 20–25 percent of the population and the main source of the current violence, are likely to be deeply dissatisfied with such an outcome.

Until now, the United States has been largely neutral with regard to Iraqi domestic politics to prove that it genuinely believes in democracy, has no imperialistic ambitions in Iraq, and is sincere about giving everyone there a fair chance. Rather than win plaudits, however, this neutral stance has led to a lack of direction, authority, and loyalty within the country. Instead of quickly establishing an Iraqi client regime, a U.S. occupying authority with little knowledge of the country had to deal directly with the Iraqis, with no strong intermediary element to buffer the relationship. This task, not surprisingly, failed to restore order, soothe Iraqi suspicions of the United States, or create a truly broad-based coalition on the basis of national rather than communal interests. By failing to choose a secularly oriented leader such as Chalabi, irrespective of his other drawbacks or merits, the United States left the door open for the ascendancy of the Shi'a religious hierarchy—the only organized force in Iraq besides Saddam Hussein's old regime.

### **IGNORING THE IMPENDING CIVIL WAR**

The Shi'a initially accepted a U.S. presence with limited patience, hoping that if they avoided fighting the United States they would eventually be handed control through elections, which would presumably bring stability and legitimacy to their government. Discussing this issue, former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger, a strong proponent of a long-term U.S. commitment to stay in Iraq, has actually quite effectively made the opposite case. An elected Iraqi government, he has explained, will bring even more conflict: "The insurgency in the Sunni region is not only a national struggle against America; it is a means to restore political dominance.... Elections in Iraq, therefore, must be regarded as the beginning of an extended contest among the various groups, involving the constant risk of civil war, or of a national struggle against the United States, or both."<sup>2</sup>

Kissinger's point is a valid one. Either the United States will remain the main military factor in Iraq and become part of the civil war, or it will stand aside and let the civil war happen. If large numbers of U.S. troops are present, the United States will inevitably be pulled into the fighting. If they protect the Sunnis, U.S. forces will end up in a confrontation with the government and gain the enmity of the Iraqi majority. If they become entangled on the government side, however, the rest of the predominantly Sunni Arab world will view the United States with far more antagonism than it already does now. Washington will also be in the strange role of fighting and taking casualties as a patron of a Shi'a Islamic-oriented regime that will probably fall short of the democratic standards that the United States projected as its goal in Iraq. The best solution would be for the United States to remove its forces before those battles begin.

### **PROVIDING A SCAPEGOAT**

Moreover, if the United States remains in Iraq as a patron to the new regime, it will receive blame for all of the government's shortcomings. If the regime is repressive, Iraqis will attribute it to U.S. malevolence toward Iraq and take it as proof that the United States is hypocritical about democracy. On the other hand, if the regime is not assertive enough and chaos continues, Iraqis will blame the continued instability and failure to destroy the insurgency on excessive U.S. legalism and timidity. Some will even claim and indeed many will believe that the United States is promoting the insurgency in order to provide itself with an excuse to remain in Iraq and keep the country weak. Similarly, Iraqi government corruption will be blamed on U.S. laxness. As the government sets policies bestowing any advantage to a specific community, region, or even individual—no matter how rational such a

decision is in terms of its practical value—it is certain to stir passionate opposition by all those not so favored who will blame this outcome on the United States.

To curry favor with the people, the new rulers will find resisting the temptation to play the anti-U.S. card difficult. Virtually the only way a new regime could prove its nationalist or Islamist credentials will be to demonstrate its independence from the United States and refusal to heed U.S. advice or demands. Propaganda from many Arab nationalist and Islamic sources inside and outside Iraq will further encourage the new leaders to do so. Anti-U.S. sentiment will also be a powerful weapon for disaffected sectors of the Iraqi population. These groups will stir up nationalist and Islamic zeal against the U.S. occupiers as the “true masters” of Iraq if the United States remains.

#### **ASSISTING THE INSURGENCY**

Furthermore, notwithstanding any temporary victories on the ground, the coalition is paradoxically helping more than harming the insurgency. Even four more years of combat by U.S. soldiers is not going to stop the war, yet the continued U.S. presence provides insurgents with the opportunity to use Islamist, nationalist, and Sunni communal appeals against the “occupation.”

The real reason U.S. forces cannot win the war against the insurgency in Iraq is not one that most foreign critics of the U.S. presence cite—that the United States behaved brutally—rather, the issue is that the United States will inevitably be far too restrained to cope with an extreme situation in which ruthless rivals are contending for power. Defeating insurgent forces consisting of Saddam loyalists, Al Qaeda terrorists, and Shi’a Islamist extremists with mild methods is impossible. Although the terrorists conducting the insurgency are limited to a base of support among a fraction of central Iraq’s minority Sunni Muslims and are unable to gain control over the country, they are certainly effective at intimidating people and are also somewhat effective at propagandizing their fellow Sunni Muslims. They exult over terrorist acts that kill the maximum number of civilians—Iraqi Shi’a or foreign—and are eager to decapitate aid workers, truck drivers, or any other foreigners they can kidnap. It is because of these terrorists’ willingness to murder, destroy Iraq’s economy and society, and continue fighting indefinitely that they will not be defeated unless they are completely wiped out.

Despite such rare exceptions as the Abu Ghraib prison scandals, the United States has kept to its commitment of restraint. U.S. forces have been determined to avoid the kinds of abuses that happened in Vietnam, allowing reporters unprecedented access to show—and ensure—that its troops behave properly toward Iraqi civilians. The U.S. military has understood that

it will win or lose this battle based on whether it wins over the confidence of the Iraqi people. Unfortunately, although such determination is laudable, it has also guaranteed failure. Gaining the confidence of the Iraqi people requires avoiding civilian casualties, but it also demands the extermination of the insurgents themselves. This problem is heightened by the fact that Shi'a Iraqis are ready to accept large numbers of Sunni civilian casualties in order to prevent Sunni terrorists from continuing to kill large numbers of Shi'a civilians. Persuasion will not impel these groups to lay down their arms, nor can any effort assure them of U.S. good will or convince them to trust an electoral process that the insurgents realize they could never win. Force is their only route to power, and anti-Americanism the best way to mobilize the masses to their side.

It is impossible, however, for any U.S. or U.S.-led force effectively to employ the methods necessary to defeat the Iraqi insurgency. Every time a U.S. Marine kills an Iraqi civilian or fires on a mosque, tens of millions of Arabs (and many Iraqis) will take it as proof that the United States has an evil anti-Arab and anti-Muslim agenda. To be clear, even if U.S. forces remain, the insurgency will not prevail and their area of control can even realistically be prevented from expanding by coalition forces; but the Sunni areas at a minimum will remain in turmoil, and the terrorists' ability to sabotage reconstruction efforts or keep the country in a constant state of instability will continue. Nothing other than an Iraqi force willing to use the necessary methods and have them accepted as "pro-Muslim" and patriotic will successfully crush the insurgency.

The requisite Iraqi force will need to be driven by a high level of passion and the motivating prospect of gaining power for its own interests and leadership. A minimally motivated, largely untrained infant army of Iraqis operating and constrained by U.S.-dictated rules of combat will not be victorious. Moreover, Iraqi troops currently face constant propaganda telling them that they are merely tools of the United States. Such soldiers, especially if the public and media perceive them as fighting for a foreign, non-Muslim, non-Arab master, will be more likely to act as agents of the insurgents, desert, or refuse to fight.

In sum, a strategy that relies on coalition troops as the main fighting force will not succeed in defeating the insurgency. The continued U.S. presence, either inevitably or through hostile manipulation of the truth, will surely offend Iraqi nationalist and Muslim sensibilities, allowing the insurgency to mobilize more support than it otherwise could. At the same time,

**The coalition presence is paradoxically helping more than harming the insurgency.**



as long as the Iraqi forces are subordinate to foreign commanders, the ongoing violence will discredit the government in Baghdad and the Iraqi forces themselves. The continued fighting will also impede improvements in living standards and the ability to provide social services necessary for the new government to win popular support. By remaining in Iraq, the United States is not assisting the government to defeat the insurgency but is assisting the insurgency's survival and persuading Iraqis to support it.

### **Responding to Critiques of Withdrawal**

---

One of the most forceful arguments against a planned and phased U.S. withdrawal is based on the administration's desire to preserve its own reputation and U.S. credibility. Refusing to leave Iraq, U.S. policymakers believe, is the only way to ensure that the United States retains a high level of credibility with its adversaries in the region. For the United States, to pull out as it did from Vietnam or to allow for the defeat of its allies as it did in the shah's Iran, they argue, would signal to radical forces that they could attack U.S. interests with impunity and disregard its threats.

Although this may sound like a persuasive argument, it does not accurately reflect the current situation. The United States achieved the most credibility possible through its willingness and ability to overthrow Saddam. Being bogged down in an endless war in Iraq, however, can only erode U.S. standing in the region. The United States is currently so overextended in Iraq that it is incapable of taking tough action on any other issue in the region or elsewhere in the world—and its enemies know it. The U.S. military presence has been used to criticize and mobilize forces against the United States. The lack of a U.S. victory has been portrayed as proof of its weakness, and U.S. misdeeds have been invented or magnified to demonstrate that the United States has evil intentions toward Arabs and Muslims.

Furthermore, Iraq has become a focal point for an anti-U.S. jihad and a not-so-covert war waged against the United States by Iran and Syria. The United States has been too preoccupied to take any serious action against either of these countries, both of whom have been aided by money and volunteers from Saudi Arabia and others driven by anti-U.S. sentiment. Once U.S. forces are no longer tied down in Iraq, the focus will shift back to Washington's enormous deterrent power and its willingness to use it against enemies when severely provoked.

The same point about enhancing overall U.S. strategic power by withdrawing from Iraq also applies to the war on terrorism. Sunni Muslim terrorists have moved their main operations to Iraq, where they seek to relive their glory days in Afghanistan fighting the Soviets. Osama bin Laden has



bragged that the U.S. presence in Iraq and its inability to defeat the insurgents there is his best recruiting tool. When the United States inevitably does leave, no matter how long it stays, the terrorists will claim that they defeated the United States to build more support for Islamist revolution elsewhere. Yet, there will be no post-occupation happy ending for the terrorists in Iraq. Their defeat at the hands of the Iraqi regime will discredit them far more than the United States.

One additional argument against withdrawal is that such a policy would mean abandoning the Iraqi people to a terrible dictatorship. This logic, however, has since become obsolete and has been invalidated by Iraq's elected government, which reflects the wishes of the majority. It is the most that can be realistically accomplished in the current era, and the new government is certainly a significant improvement over the dictatorship it replaces.

Some might argue that the United States should remain in Iraq because many Iraqis are still positive about or even support the U.S. presence. After Saddam was deposed, besides hoping that conditions under U.S. occupation would eventually lead to improved living standards, most Shi'a understandably believed that the United States would put them into power, directly or indirectly. It is why a key figure such as Sistani was prepared to be patient, urging his followers to avoid clashes with U.S. forces and mobilizing Shi'a support against even Shi'a insurgents, such as Moqtada al-Sadr, who wanted to fight the U.S. forces. Sistani and others like him questioned quite logically why they should wage war against the world's superpower instead of merely waiting for the United States to hand power over and then exit the country. If the United States remains in Iraq, however, political uncertainty will persist, and the Shi'a will come to believe that the United States is actually blocking them from achieving real power. Increasing Shi'a anger and even violence against the coalition presence, therefore, may arise from a rational sense of self-interest and even self-preservation. At that point, the United States will cease to be their benefactor and will become their enemy.

Such a scenario—in which U.S. military presence and political influence is too obtrusive—would be the only way that the nightmare of transforming Iraq into a client state of Iran could come to fruition. Under normal circumstances, the best guarantors against this outcome are the Iraqi Shi'a themselves once they achieve power. Why should they submit to the dictates of non-Arab Iran, against whom many Shi'a troops fought and died in the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War? Indeed, Iran's continued attempts at subverting

**Being bogged down  
in Iraq can only  
erode U.S. standing  
in the region.**

Iraq and its backing of puppet groups against the new Iraqi government are sure to turn Iraqis against Tehran far more effectively than the United States ever could. The only incentives that Iraqi Shi'a would have to follow Iran is if they believed that it could assist them in forcing out the U.S. military presence or in achieving a Shi'a-led regime against perceived U.S. political opposition. If the United States overstays its welcome, Iraqis may unite against its presence, while U.S. taxpayers finance an attempt to rebuild an economy for extremists to inherit.

### **Rejecting Wishful Thinking**

---

The worst possible future outcome would be if the U.S. government, seeing its large-scale military strategy failing, were to throw in more resources futilely while desperately trying publicly and rhetorically to cover up the truth. False claims of steady progress in fighting the insurgency would then be coupled with efforts to hide the problems of a failing or increasingly hostile Iraqi government. Those conditions would divide U.S. public opinion even more bitterly, discredit the U.S. president, and subvert U.S. influence worldwide.

There is good reason to fear the power of wishful thinking to produce a dangerous outcome. Indeed, it has already resulted in three major policy disasters in recent years in the Middle East. In these cases, Washington consistently overestimated the power of moderates, the inevitability of pragmatism, and the appeal of material benefits to U.S. enemies. During the Oslo peace process of the 1990s, for example, U.S. policymakers and political elites were convinced that a history of defeat and suffering would persuade Palestinian leaders and Arab states to make peace with Israel if an attractive deal was on the table. In fact, Yasser Arafat rejected the terms of the 2000 Camp David accord and the Clinton plan because he believed their victory was inevitable and that the conflict was itself too valuable a political asset to discard. Syria's late president, Hafiz al-Asad, acted similarly when he rejected a U.S.-brokered peace with Israel that same year. Second, prior to the September 11 attacks, the United States underestimated the threat posed by radical Islamist terrorism. Finally, policymakers optimistically and mistakenly assessed that Iraqis would be grateful to the United States for liberating them from Saddam and would eagerly embrace democracy. Although the administration's analysis of the Middle East was correct in its assessment that regional problems result largely from dictators who conceal their authoritarian incompetence by blaming the United States, this did not necessarily mean the United States could fix the situation through regime change in Iraq. These multiple policy failures indicate that the time has now come

for a U.S. policy to blend its noble goals and good intentions with a realistic assessment of the region on its own terms.

From the beginning, the war and subsequent reconstruction in Iraq have been viewed through one of two paradigms. For the war's advocates, the root of Iraq's problem was Saddam and his circle of parasites. This viewpoint predicted that, after the United States quickly ejected them from power, the Iraqi people's hidden but innately moderate nature would be revealed—a prophecy that proved to be terribly wrong.

For most of the war's critics, however, the United States was the bad guy in Iraq. Such views were rife with conspiracy theories, accusing the United States of acting as an imperialist country motivated by hunger for power and oil. Indeed, critics of the war often sounded like an extension of the Arab nationalist and Islamist extremist ideologies that dominate regional discourse. Distortions of the U.S. government's views and intentions made understanding where it went wrong in Iraq impossible.

**Iraqi Shi'as will only follow Iran if they believe Tehran could assist them against the U.S.**

Yet, contrary to the widely purveyed stereotypes of the Bush administration, the actual U.S. motivation, although strategically flawed, was quite liberal and humanitarian. It viewed the Iraqis as modern, civilized people who would eagerly embrace moderation and democracy and expected them to act rationally to establish a workable and peaceful political system. The administration hoped that the Arab world at large would also see Iraq as proof of both U.S. benevolence and the value of rejecting extremism for a more Western-style approach. Perhaps partly inspired by these conceptual misunderstandings, U.S. policy in post-Saddam Iraq made some particularly costly mistakes, such as dissolving Iraq's army and mobilizing too few U.S. forces at the outset of conflict.

The choice between these two deeply flawed visions left little room for the reality of the situation unfolding on the ground. Although the administration insisted that democracy promotion was viable in the Middle East, opponents were too focused on attacking U.S. motivations and perhaps too politically correct to point out that Iraq might not be ready for such a leap. Equally few were willing to admit openly that communal hatred, a political culture extolling violence and extremism, leaders with soaring personal ambitions, and a lack of an alternative ideology to Islamism with any real leadership or popularity were factors that were not conducive to a moderate postwar future characterized by compromise and negotiation.

## **The Future of U.S. Strategy**

---

According to current U.S. policy, Washington has already committed itself to defending Iraq's newly elected government. The United States will then be forced into an Iraqi political conflict that could easily evolve into a civil war between Islamists and nationalists, Sunnis and Shi'as, and Kurds and Arabs, as well as among competing would-be tyrants, to protect the regime's stability and legitimacy as well as U.S. interests. Yet, how much control will the United States actually have over the regime it sponsors? Will that government support U.S. regional policies, or will Baghdad's new rulers prefer to cultivate relations with other Arab states and prove their nationalist and Islamic credentials by bashing the United States verbally and then ignoring U.S. wishes in practice? Indeed, although the United States may be successful in its efforts to hold free elections and have a constitution drafted, even if it means spending billions more dollars and losing hundreds more U.S. lives, it will still not be able to expect more than a certain amount of sympathy or assistance from the new Iraqi regime. Furthermore, all of this is dependent on Sistani's continued presence as a moderating factor. His death, for example, would create a far more difficult situation. These are not propitious conditions for the United States to remain in Iraq as the political power broker, the main force fighting the insurgents, and the agent propping up the Iraqi regime.

Nor can the United States realistically expect any international assistance to help facilitate a democratically elected, legitimate Iraqi government. Kissinger wrote, "Some degree of internationalization is the only realistic path toward stability inside Iraq and sustained domestic support in America."<sup>3</sup> He also sensibly argued that "other nations should find it in their interest to participate at least in the tasks of political and economic reconstruction."<sup>4</sup> They should, but they won't. Indeed, with the exception of the United Kingdom, the likelihood of European countries making significant aid, investment, or military contributions in Iraq is nonexistent.

Nor will the Arab world, with the exception of Jordan, do much to assist the United States actively, regardless of any efforts or concessions Washington may make on the Arab-Israeli conflict. U.S. success in Iraq is simply too strongly opposed to the interests of Arab governments because it would strengthen U.S. regional influence, make regime change look like a viable strategy, and encourage the citizens of the Middle East to demand reform and democracy in their own countries. Thus, although high-ranking U.S. officials will continue to wave long lists of cooperating countries, the United States will essentially be on its own—with the exception of British support—on the big issues.

Before the war, U.S. officials and military officers had unrealistic expectations of a long-term, large-scale U.S. presence. The United States failed to set a clear time frame for withdrawal. These factors raised Iraqi suspicions, already misinformed and inflamed by domestic radicals and Arab regime-backed media. Insurgents were able to argue that violence was necessary to force a U.S. departure. By overstaying its welcome, the United States would provide the insurgents with even more ammunition and start to persuade Shi'a Iraqis that the terrorists may well have been correct about evil U.S. intentions to take over their country and destroy Islam. Moreover, by tying the U.S. withdrawal to establishing stability and building democracy, U.S. policy essentially gave the insurgents control of the situation. They can continue their violent efforts to sabotage stability to compel U.S. forces to remain, while at the same claiming that their violent successes would, in fact, force them to leave.

**A U.S. withdrawal strategy is the best choice among an unattractive set of options.**

Equally, there is not much that the United States will be able to do if the new regime's domestic and foreign policies are not in line with U.S. interests. Will Washington be willing to fight a Shi'a-dominated regime in order to defend the rights of a Sunni community whose actual leadership is largely hostile to the United States? If the new government seeks to crush the insurgency in a manner inconsistent with U.S. standards of ethical and legal behavior, is the United States going to stop it? Would continued fighting in Iraq year after year by U.S. forces serve either U.S. interests or the well-being of Iraq's people? When the United States does leave Iraq, even if it delays that outcome for many years, will the structures it has created or the people it has kept in power survive for any longer than if they were left to fend for themselves in 2006 after constitutional elections are held?

A U.S. withdrawal strategy would not be the result of cowardice, foolishness, or appeasement but would rather be the best choice among an unattractive set of options. Instead of affecting change through a military presence, the United States could adopt an indirect strategy, combining support for economic reconstruction with good relations with the new government. The goal would be to form a strategic relationship with the new Iraqi regime that is even stronger than the U.S. link to Egypt and similar to its alliance with Jordan.

However well intentioned the United States may be and however much it sincerely tries to act in the Iraqi people's interest, the time has arrived to switch gears. Over the course of 2005, the United States should plan a phased withdrawal in coordination with the new Iraqi government. Remain-

ing in Iraq too long will bring the United States into confrontation with a new government and the Shi'a majority. It will make the United States responsible for every internal conflict in Iraq and every misdeed of the new regime, squandering the good will that the United States has managed to gain but still not winning the war militarily. Hopefully, elections will galvanize the Iraqi leaders and people toward democracy, cooperation, peace, and unity. In this case, the United States can treat the government that emerges in Iraq as a real partner that can take responsibility for its own country. Regardless of the outcome, however, it is time now to understand the need in the not-distant future for a gradual and responsible U.S. withdrawal rather than wait until crises or events force its departure, resulting in humiliating defeat. There are no ideal choices, only realistic ones.

## Notes

---

1. Ahmad Chalabi, "The Future Iraq Deserves," *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2004.
2. Henry A. Kissinger, "Henry Kissinger: Now, Back to Defining a New World Order," *International Herald Tribune*, November 6, 2004, <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2004/11/05/opinion/edkissinger.html> (accessed January 29, 2005).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.