# Toward a U.S. Exit Strategy from Iraq and a Transition to Full Sovereignty

By Imad Salamey and Frederic Pearson . Edited by Erik Leaver , October 1, 2005
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More than a year and a half has passed since the U.S.-led coalition's invasion of Iraq, and yet little progress has been seen in the daily lives of Iraqi people. Not only has reconstruction stalled, but human rights abuses by U.S. soldiers at the Abu-Ghraib prison and the crackdown on political opposition groups have undermined Washington's efforts to emerge as a champion of democratic and human rights in Iraq.

America's inability to control the security situation and the rise of various Sunni and Shiite insurgents has resulted in a dangerous situation for Iraqis, along with added potential for terrorism in the region.

Earlier this spring, the Bush administration sought international cooperation for a viable U.S. exit strategy from Iraq; without a clear vision for both political and military exits, there were no takers. With war raging in Iraq, the political process in shambles, and a dire economic situation, a new plan is desperately needed.

Perhaps the most significant near-term challenge for a new plan is the question of returning full sovereignty to Iraqis in the midst of ongoing insurgencies that daily target U.S. occupation forces and Iraqis with ties to the occupation.

Key elements in this challenge include a viable pluralist constitution, credible elections, and preserving Iraq's political unity. The immediate question that no candidate is discussing on the U.S. campaign trail is what transitional plan can achieve such complicated goals while providing the U.S. with a viable exit strategy.

The political and social fragility of the emerging Iraq requires priority planning to further integrate and strengthen Iraq's multi-ethnic, religious, and secular fabric. The goals must be smooth system changes, nurturing both indigenous and imported democratic forms, and saving the country from shocking and radical changes that may cost it and the entire region years of social, economic, and political upheavals. But for such plans to be successful, Iraqis themselves, through negotiations among their various factions, must inspire them, with an emphasis on indigenous groups rather than former exiles. Most importantly the solutions need to be nurtured by a supportive regional and international environment.

In contrast to developments to date, this environment requires the establishment of a multilateral international community highly reflective of Arab-Kurdish-Iranian-Turkish regional interests. Saudi proposals took a step in this direction but their proposal failed as it only addressed the military situation. A regional conference called by the UN to adopt economic, security, and political plans to strengthen cooperation among Iraq's bordering countries, and to include European and Middle Eastern participants would appear to be an essential first step.

But to establish full sovereignty, steps must be taken inside Iraq as well. The first step must be a direct, popular election where Iraqis as a whole, and not a minority or a foreign neocolonial power or powers, decide the country's future. Enough damage and humiliation has already been experienced to make such a move imperative. Yet lurking in the background is Washington's ambivalence about the ultimate outcome of democratic reforms in Iraq, should for example a militant Islamic faction, a nationalistic Shi'a or Sunni party, or Kurdish militancy emerge in the electoral process. The ultimate turn to a former Iraqi military leader to help negotiate and quell the insurgency in Falluja in the Spring of 2004 portends the lingering potential of a military or strongman figure in Iraq's future.

If a disrupted and conflicted state such as South Africa can determine its political future based on an agreed power transition and centralized authority without outside interference, then Iraq's citizens also should be able to select reputable leaders who can come to terms on a much desired political reform plan, and follow that up, as South Africa did, with civic training for the masses in participatory democracy and voting.

One set of constitutional provisions that might foster a viable political arrangement while preserving the country's unity, would be to adopt electoral and power sharing formulae that guarantee access to positions of power. While the power-sharing models of states such as Lebanon have been marred by internal war and external intervention (by Syria, Israel, the Palestinians, Iran, and others), they nevertheless constitute regionally appropriate strategies in divided societies. Apportionment of top governmental posts by ethnic and religious, i.e., confessional, representation, with inclusion of sub-groups wherever possible, would allay some of the concerns of those potentially shut out of power.

Yet the key would still remain building confidence in guarantees of ethnically and regionally based rights and security. The Kurds continue to raise concerns that local autonomy provisions in the transitional constitution might easily be eroded if a dominant Shi'a majority rule took effect. On the other hand, Shi'ite leaders have expressed opposition to the provisions that give the 20% Kurdish population an effective veto. This would appear to call for concerted diplomatic brokering of terms, which would reassure the Kurds that their rights as a minority would not be violated and would be protected by either domestic or international guarantees, while allowing the Shi'a community the sense of majority rule that it seeks.

None of these communities is monolithic, as subgroups and rival leaders exist. Since threat perception tends to unify and polarize ethnic groups, a more trusting environment with less pressing security concerns and rivalries over power and wealth, as in access to the oil and water resources, presumably would allow a greater chance for cross-cutting relationships and networks to develop. Civic institutions, such as service organizations and professional associations, must be nurtured to include diverse membership bridging the ethnic divide.

With a political solution in place, a military or security solution is also needed. The controversy about the relative authority of American and Iraqi leaders in authorizing military actions indicates that it is difficult to base American forces on Iraqi territory for the long term and have the new government emerge with popular backing and international credibility. This was evident in the clashes between the U.S. and al-Sadr in the holy city of Najaf, as American military commanders were often calling the shots on the ground with little or no consultation with their Iraqi counterparts. Ultimately an Iraqi-brokered ceasefire and militia disarmament were necessary and feasible.

In Najaf, as in countless other battles inside Iraq, Washington and American authorities have misread the military and political situation. The Bush administration uses the fighting as justification for the continued presence of foreign military forces. Yet it is precisely the presence of foreign military forces that, as a constant irritant, is a major cause of the instability.

With the U.S. out of Iraq, it would be better positioned with its substantial resources, along with the international and surrounding Arab and regional community, to play a more effective role for reform by offering assistance in developing moderate ethnic, democratic, and human rights policies. Washington's ability to influence states' domestic policies can be greater as a superpower from the outside than from the inside, playing kingmaker and attempting to control a divided population while stimulating and entrenching internal domestic disputes and uprisings.

The U.S. and Britain took upon themselves the responsibility to overthrow President Hussein's regime; now it is time to let the Iraqis themselves take more fully the responsibility to choose the alternative. This can best be achieved by fostering multilateral policies and regional cooperation, reinvigorating regional organizations such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, to advance democracy and security in Iraq and inevitably throughout the Middle East.