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## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED? A WAY FORWARD FOR THE UK IN IRAQ

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Four years after President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq, Chris Abbott examines the situation in Iraq today and argues that we urgently need realistic policy proposals for a UK withdrawal that do not simply abandon the Iraqi people to their fate.

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### The situation in Iraq

On 1 May 2003, President Bush stood on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and declared “mission accomplished” 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 US/UK-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein, 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, with around 25,000 wounded in action.<sup>2</sup>

But even these shocking figures do not reveal the true horror of life for ordinary Iraqis.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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>4</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>5</sup>

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

In global security terms, the invasion of Iraq has been a complete disaster.

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

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the Middle East, the repercussions of which will be felt for decades, not years – as that is how long it is likely to take to 'defeat' the insurgency, if indeed it can ever be defeated.<sup>6</sup>

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>7</sup> Furthermore, it has without a doubt diverted attention and resources away from other, much more serious, security issues.<sup>8</sup>

For Britain and America it has been an error of almost unforgivable magnitude. Many commentators consider it to have been the worst foreign policy disaster since the Suez Crisis, over 50 years ago. Yet the governments of both countries continue to stand by their decisions, with Tony Blair only hinting occasionally at "regret" for some of the mistakes that have been made.

#### Four more years?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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>9</sup> However, by staying in Iraq, this is the very fate the UK is facing.

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.<sup>10</sup> The US has by far the largest number of troops still in Iraq (approximately 145,000), and although the US State Department lists some 25 additional countries with forces in the country<sup>11</sup> (26 if Iraqi forces are counted, which the State Department leaves off the list), of those it is only the UK providing a military force which makes a real difference in operational capability (with around 5,000 troops).<sup>12</sup> This places the UK in a somewhat unique position.

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.

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 – demonstrating an understandable concern over what might happen if troops pull out.<sup>13</sup>

### A positive way forward

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.

There is a problem though. Following Bush’s rejection of the bi-partisan Iraq Study Group report – with its 79 proposals, including troop withdrawals and dialogue with Iran and Syria<sup>14</sup> – 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.

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 recently announced Iraq Commission – a British version of the Iraq Study Group – 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.

Such policies need to recognise three realities:

- 1) Mistakes have been made and the UK has played a central role in helping to create the current situation in Iraq.
- 2) There is currently no military solution to the violence in Iraq, and the presence of Coalition troops is likely to be fuelling the insurgency.
- 3) The UK only has a limited ability to influence US, or indeed Iraqi, approaches to the conflict.

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

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.

b) 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.

c) 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.

d) 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.

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. So while the proposals are put forward in the full knowledge that they are likely to be ignored by those in power, they are made in the spirit of the moral imperative that faces us all to find a way forward.

### Conclusion

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.

There can be little doubt that US, UK and other occupation 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. The proposals outlined in this briefing may have the potential to form part of such a strategy that offers a way forward. Other analysts will have proposals of their own; let us continue to hear them. The government must understand that there are ways of withdrawing troops from Iraq that will not necessarily result in disaster.

We may never be able to really declare “mission accomplished”, but we must do more to truly support the people of Iraq as they struggle to create a better future for their country.

[www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk)

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> On 11 June 2007, Iraq Body Count were showing that between 65,116 and 71,328 Iraqi civilians had been reported killed in Iraq since 19 March 2003. These figures are derived from media reports and are recognised as an absolute provable minimum; the actual number of civilians killed is likely to be much higher. See [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org).

<sup>2</sup> On 11 June 2007, Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, were reporting 3,511 US military fatalities and 277 other Coalition fatalities in Iraq. They were also reporting 25,549 US soldiers wounded in action as of 19 May 2007. See <http://icasualties.org/oif/>.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in\\_depth/baghdad\\_navigator/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/baghdad_navigator/) for month-by-month statistics of major bomb attacks and civilian casualties in Baghdad.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Civilians Without Protection: The Ever-worsening Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq* (April 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, *Unjust and Unfair: The Death Penalty in Iraq* (20 April 2007).

<sup>6</sup> The Pentagon is reportedly considering plans to maintain 30-40,000 troops in Iraq for decades to come. See, Steve Inskeep and Guy Raz, "Pentagon Studies Long-Term Commitment in Iraq", *NPR* (21 May 2007), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10292643>.

<sup>7</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>8</sup> Chris Abbott, Paul Rogers and John Sloboda, *Beyond Terror: The Truth About the Real Threats to Our World* (London: Rider, 2007).

<sup>9</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), [http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2005/11/00\\_gard-johns\\_there-are-risks-if-the-us-withdraws.htm](http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2005/11/00_gard-johns_there-are-risks-if-the-us-withdraws.htm).

<sup>10</sup> GlobalSecurity.org, *Non-US Forces in Iraq* (February 2007), [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq\\_orbat\\_coalition.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_orbat_coalition.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *Iraq Weekly Status Report* (US Department of State, 23 May 2007), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/85583.pdf>, p.24.

<sup>12</sup> It is surprisingly hard to find agreed figures for the number of countries with troops in Iraq or the precise size of their deployments. This is partly because troops numbers fluctuate and also because countries are deploying troops under the US-led Multi-National Force – Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom), the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the NATO training mission in Iraq. This is why figures cited here may differ slightly to those from other sources.

<sup>13</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).

<sup>14</sup> James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton (Co-Chairs), *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward – A New Approach* (Vintage Books, 2006).