

Advocating American Troops' Withdrawal from Iraq

By

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In March 2003, the Bush administration embroiled the United States in an armed intervention of Iraq, a war that leading scholars deemed “unnecessary” at the time (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2003). Under the flimsy pretext of a crisis for America’s national security in particular, and international peace and security in general, emanating from the perceived threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction – that were never uncovered (at least to any amount that could justify a full-scale war) – the President decided that armed intervention was the most prudent choice to stave off this threat. With the failure of unearthing significant WMD in Iraq, the program of the war was conveniently shifted to delivering the Iraqi people from a tyrannical ruler to democratic order. This process of deliverance, at best a “stalemate” (Posen, 2006), has seen an alarming loss of American lives and increasing entrenchment of the American commitment in Iraq, while putting severe pressures on the American economy. *At this point, the United States should look for a viable exit strategy culminating in the withdrawal of its troops, and enthusiastically seek multilateral or integrational solutions to the reconstruction of Iraq.*

At the onset, it must be clearly understood that the recommendation for American withdrawal is not being made on the grounds that going to war was itself an erroneous decision on the part of the Bush administration. Instead, the

calls for a swift and comprehensive exit are being made on the basis of a consideration of America's long term national interests, which the protraction of the war does not serve at all. As Posen maintains, the reduction of military, economic and political costs this shall entail could then be used to good effect elsewhere (2006). The war in Iraq has resulted in thousands of American lives lost, while systematically depleting the economy; involvement in Iraq also limits the strategic choices for the US.

The current debates surrounding the Presidential Election of 2008 throw some light on what future policies on Iraq could be. There remains a sharp divide between the Democratic and Republican positions, with the former favouring a more rapid withdrawal and the latter making withdrawal contingent upon certain conditions. To elaborate, Sen. Hillary Clinton, a Democratic presidential primary, had spoken of a three-step strategy, with an expedited return of troops and the employment of a "new diplomatic initiative" (quoted at America.Gov) engaging other countries to contribute to Iraqi reconstruction. The Democratic presidential candidate, Sen. Barack Obama, recommends an immediate American exit from Iraq, pulling two brigades out every month and providing \$2 billion in humanitarian aid to the war-ravaged country (America.Gov). Finally, the Republican position, as evinced by Sen. John McCain, remains that the training and development of Iraqi soldiers is vital to an American withdrawal; unless Iraq's security forces become stronger, the country shall be mired in civil war and fall prey to the devices of the al Qaeda, deeming the United States' exit impossible (America.Gov). From these contrary positions, it is clear that this debate is fiercely contested. To stake the claims of the recommendations of this essay, it is best to begin by tackling the opposing arguments on their merits, not least because existing policies are informed by the same.

One of the strongest cases against an exit strategy is that an American withdrawal shall plunge Iraq into a protracted civil war. However, a closer inspection reveals that the conditions of civil war are already in existence; the Baath party's fall from grace and the advantages derived by fundamentalist Islamists due to the war has led to a situation of *de facto* civil war. The prolonged presence of American soldiers and counter-insurgency operations has been unable to respond to this rapidly deteriorating situation, where insurgents target civilians and Iraqis kill Iraqis, all the while putting American lives at risk (for the relevant data, see O'Hanlon and Campbell, 2007). Evidently, the spectre of civil war has already unravelled, and it is futile to pin continued American engagement in Iraq on such feeble grounds.

Another important argument against withdrawal, in line with Sen. McCain's reasoning, is that American forces must only leave Iraq after ensuring that Iraq's security forces are competent enough to maintain order. However, this argument confuses what is of essence to the country: political consolidation, as against military competency (Odom, 2006). In any case, the progress for Iraqi security forces has left a lot to be desired. Continued American presence only exacerbates the matter, because Iraqi politicians do not feel compelled to resolve the issues of changing loyalties and lacklustre attempts at improvement, given the US' existing cover. All this does, is produce a culture of dependence on American assistance which, the more it continues, can only be detrimental to Iraq in the long term.

Further counters to a time-bound withdrawal of troops are the arguments that an American exit from Iraq at this moment shall increase the growing influence of terrorists in the country, while severely undermining the stature and credibility of the United States in the eyes of the world. However, this is far from the truth. Firstly, the point about terrorists is a double-edged sword and is a risk that must

be run. While a withdrawal may indeed augment the power of terrorists in Iraq, it is equally salient to note that the American presence has provided the al Qaeda (and its many spin-offs or imitators) with a free hand to attack US nationals. Indeed, it is the very occupation which the opponents of a withdrawal seek to prolong that endangers the lives of Americans and Iraqis alike by proving to be a rallying point for terrorists. In fact, pulling out of Iraq may encourage the Sunnis to take the offensive to the al Qaeda and its sympathizers (Odom, 2006; Posen, 2006).

Secondly, it is foolish to expect that an American withdrawal can change (for the worse), to any considerable degree, the existing image of the United States in the eyes of the world. As Richard Haass argues, this image of the credibility of the US was already in question once it launched an unwarranted preventive war, and got further tainted when it delayed the involvement of the United Nations and other (willing) countries to aid the post-conflict reconstruction of Iraq (2006, 182-194). In addition, recent studies argue that the moral fibre of the US, which fuels the pursuits of democracy promotion and liberation of other peoples as ethical responsibilities, is in itself illiberal (Desch, 2007). Thus, instead of further undermining the US' credibility, withdrawal from Iraq may, in fact, strengthen the American image somewhat.

Finally, another important – but shaky – argument against withdrawal is that a rapid exit after such a long battle would severely demoralize the American troops. However, as Lt. Gen. William E. Odom observes, nothing could be farther from the truth:

“Hiding behind the argument of troop morale shows no willingness to accept the responsibilities of command. The truth is, most wars would stop early if soldiers had the choice of whether or not to continue. This is

certainly true in Iraq, where a withdrawal is likely to raise morale among U.S. forces." (2006)

Thus, it is safe to say that the opposing arguments to the American troops' withdrawal do not hold much water. But, it must be remembered that the case for a well-conceived exit strategy does not only rest on this negation of contrary arguments. It is also supplied with the vital consideration of American national interests (bringing us back to our initial disclaimer); these are what we must now investigate to clinch the case for withdrawal.

The key American national interest in the Persian Gulf region is that of oil, though contrary to popular perception, the interest is not of control, but of ensuring a regular supply from the Middle East to the United States; this also entails making sure that political adversaries do not gain control of these resources to the detriment of the US and other areas of the world dependent on energy supply from the region (Posen, 2006). Some analysts claim the institution of democracy in Iraq to be another American national interest, but in the light of evidence considered above, the present essay shall not regard it the same. Prevention of links forming between terrorist organizations and state administrations is also a key national interest because

"...we have learned from the alliance between al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that it is unwise to allow terrorists to get a foothold in a sympathetic state from which they can propagandize, recruit, organize, train, and plan in relative security." (Posen, 2006)

The concerns of oil are shared by other countries and many of them would be willing to contribute to a multilateral solution, which could be institutionally derived through the United Nations. Even if the US is required to maintain an

active deployment in Iraq due to such a turn, it shall still be many times smaller than its current operations.

Furthermore, the outcome of an Iraqi civil war would, in all probability, be a stalemate – a result most favourable to American national interests (Posen, 2006; Odom, 2006). The best way to expedite this situation is to pull out of Iraq. The gravest ramification of this stalemate could be an intensification of al Qaeda operations in the Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq; however, as discussed above, this is a contentious issue, and it could very well be the US' troops themselves which are causing such a calamity.

In conclusion, it is also poignant to look at the more vivid reminders that urge for an American withdrawal from this “war of choice” (Arnove, 2007). The unabated loss of American lives in Iraq, since the launch of the war, ran close to 4,100 deaths in June, 2008; this number is far greater than those resulting from the offensive in Afghanistan, totalling 501 deaths in over seven years (Defenselink, 2008). The economic downturn for the US because of the war in Iraq has been immense too, stretching well beyond \$300 billion as early as February 2006 (Kosiak, 2006). In light of these facts, it is increasingly difficult to argue against an American withdrawal from Iraq. As this essay has shown, the case for devising an exit strategy is firmly grounded in the logic of servicing America's military, political and economic interests. The arguments against withdrawal only seem to justify the continuation of poor policy choices, and it is in the US' express interests that a plan for military disengagement from Iraq be devised without hesitation or delay.

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