

HOW TO END THE OCCUPATION

A U.S. Exit Strategy

by David Cortright



Photo: Medea Benjamin

On April 14 military families placed 684 flowers at the White House to commemorate the troops killed as of that day and to demand that the U.S. forces be brought home now. They also scattered thousands of rose petals on the lawn to remember the many Iraqis who have died. The families included the Medinas, the Niederers, the Del Solars, the Pritchards and the Gonzalez's—all of whose loved ones were died in Iraq.

The worsening chaos and violence in Iraq have exposed the utter failure of U.S. policy, and the need for a fundamental change in direction. The first step is to halt offensive military operations. Continued U.S. incursions into Iraqi cities will only deepen the cycle of violence and revenge.

The longer the U.S. stays in Iraq, the more intense the resistance will become. The U.S. occupation is the problem, not the solution. All people naturally resist attempts by a foreign power to control their destiny. However grateful Iraqis may be for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, they do not want and will not accept continued U.S. military and political domination of their country.

Instead of clinging to control, the U.S. should develop a plan for a genuine transfer to Iraqis of all political, military and economic authority. The key is for Washington to make a clear commitment to withdraw U.S. military forces and dismantle all U.S. military bases in Iraq. Such a commitment would change the entire situation in Iraq. From there the U.S. could negotiate the precise process and timetable for withdrawal.

It is time for the U.S. to stand aside and entrust the future to the Iraqis themselves. There can be no Iraqi sovereignty at U.S. gunpoint.

Once the U.S. decides to withdraw its forces, the UN could be asked to play a role in mediating the

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serious divisions that exist among Iraqis. The UN could convene an all-parties conference in Iraq that would include the many groups previously excluded by the U.S. All significant social and political leaders would gather for prolonged consultations to reach agreement on the political transition process and the creation of a new government as soon as practicable.

The UN's knowledge of electoral and political transitions in war-torn countries could also be helpful to Iraq. The support of the UN would increase the prospects for a successful political transition so long as it does not give in to U.S. control.

A more international process would also help to assure an independent Iraq. The parties could seek UN assistance in convening an international conference. Germany, France and Russia have already called for such a conference. Such a conference could develop an Iraqi approved plan for assuring multinational security protection during the transition process and greater international support for Iraqi self-rule.

While there is no obvious blueprint for a U.S. exit strategy, it is absolutely necessary that the United States leave Iraq as soon as possible. The following are key elements of an alternative policy:

1. Commit to an end to all U.S. military involvement in Iraq and develop a schedule for a phased withdrawal.

2. Abandon any pretense of controlling Iraq's political and economic future.

3. Ask the UN to play a key role in the transition to Iraqi self-rule.

4. Transfer all political and military authority and control of economic resources to a broadly representative Iraqi transitional body and subsequent elected government.

5. Support the creation of a genuine multinational security force, under UN authority, to provide interim protection.

Taking these steps does not mean abandoning American responsibilities. As the occupying power the U.S. is bound by international law to guarantee the security and well being of the Iraqi people. The U.S. will remain responsible for helping to finance humanitarian relief and economic reconstruction.■

David Cortright is the author of *A Peaceful Superpower: The Movement Against War in Iraq*, and a cofounder of the Win Without War coalition.



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