

## **WITHDRAWING FROM IRAQ – Public Opinion and the UN Option**

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### *The problem facing us*

The primary problem facing the anti-war movement in Britain is that of paralysis. The movement needs to identify and remove the factors that are blocking the effective expression of the suppressed rage that a huge number of people in Britain still feel about the ongoing war in Iraq. The majority of people in Britain are against the war, and most of them are actually angry. In a YouGov poll in March 2007, 59% of Britons said that British troops should be brought home ‘more or less immediately’.<sup>i</sup> A MORI poll in September 2007 found that 41% of people in Britain feel ‘angry’ about the war.<sup>ii</sup> This level of dissatisfaction has had minimal political impact, mainly resulting in the expressed desire of British military and political leaders to transfer British forces from (relatively quiet) southern Iraq to (politically-quieter, though militarily-more-intense) Afghanistan.<sup>iii</sup>

To be blunt, the anger that a near-majority of British people feel about the occupation of Iraq has been of relatively little benefit to the people in Iraq. It has not been mobilized in a way that has changed British or US policy in or towards Iraq dramatically for the better.

In other words, the foremost task of the anti-war movement today is to find the goals, information, channels of communication, methods of mobilization and tone of voice that can turn the pent-up rage and compassion of millions of British people into a significant political force. To do this, we must have some idea of what is causing the current blockage.

### *Paralysing ambivalence - UK*

In my view, the major stumbling block lies to action is the widespread concern about the possible consequences of an immediate and unprepared withdrawal.

Earlier we noted the YouGov poll in March 2007 that found 59% of Britons said that British troops should be brought home ‘more or less immediately’. The only alternative offered was ‘British forces should continue to be deployed in Iraq for at least the next year or two’, which gained 29% support. So, the first figure (59%) should probably be interpreted as supporting ‘withdrawal in much less than a year’.

Just three months later in June 2007, the same polling agency, using the same methodology, found quite a different result. 37% supported the proposition that ‘Britain should withdraw all its troops from Iraq as soon as possible, and certainly within the next six months’. 40% said ‘Britain should set a time limit within the next 12- 18 months for withdrawing all its troops from Iraq’. These are very nearly equivalent questions, showing a fall from 59% to 37% for ‘more or less immediate withdrawal’, and an increase from 29% to 40% for ‘one more year or so’.<sup>iv</sup>

Looking back slightly further, in October 2006, two different polls in that month found roughly the same proportion (56% to 61%) of Britons wanted unconditional

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withdrawal (regardless of conditions in Iraq). However, the two polls found very different responses on the question of ‘immediate withdrawal’. YouGov found that only 19% of Britons wanted the Government to ‘Withdraw all British troops from Iraq immediately’, while ICM found 45% wanted British forces pulled out immediately.<sup>v</sup>

*Table 1: British public opinion and withdrawal from Iraq (October 2006)<sup>vi</sup>*

Options \ Polling agency	YouGov	ICM
Withdraw immediately	<b>19%</b>	<b>45%</b>
Withdraw within a year	<b>37%</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Total within a year</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>61%</b>

There are other results one could cite which point in a similar, confusing, direction. There appears to be deep ambivalence in Britain over the question of withdrawal.

### *Parallel ambivalence - Iraq*

This is not surprising when we look to Iraqi opinion on the same question. A majority of Iraqis want US/UK withdrawal. For example, the ORB poll taken at the end of February 2008 found that while 70% of Iraqis want US-led forces to leave, only 46% expressed a wish for immediate withdrawal.<sup>vii</sup> Another poll conducted for the BBC and other international broadcasters in February 2008 found that an even lower figure. According to this poll, opposition to US forces has softened rather than hardened since August 2007, with the proportion of Iraqis thinking attacks on US forces are acceptable dropping for the first time, from 57% to 42%. The proportion of Iraqis believing US forces should ‘leave now’ also dropped – according to this poll - from 47% to 38%, over the same period

According to the BBC poll, most Iraqis thought an immediate US withdrawal would not worsen the situation – only 29% thought security would get worse; 23% thought it would remain the same; 46% believed it would get better. At the same time, the poll found that 80% of respondents supported the US having a role in the future providing security against al-Qa’eda in Iraq; 76% supported US training for the Iraqi military; and majorities supported US provision of security against Iran (68%) and Turkey (66%).<sup>viii</sup>

Past opinion polls indicate a similar ambivalence in Iraq over many years.<sup>ix</sup> The key issue seems to be a deep concern as to the post-occupation security situation.

### *The UN replacement force*

The most natural way of trying to reduce possible post-withdrawal conflict and chaos would be to replace the outgoing US/UK occupation forces with an alternative international force that is independent of the Western powers and subordinate to an agreed Iraqi political process.

The Transnational Foundation For Peace And Future Research (TFF) has suggested some principles and suggestions for such a force, of which the most important are the requirements that there should be ‘no military personnel from countries that have been occupiers’ (they might come from the Arab League, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, or some other independent grouping) and that funding should be ‘secured for at least 5 years at the outset’.<sup>x</sup>

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One criterion not specifically mentioned by the TFF is need to place responsibility for any such force in the hands of the UN General Assembly rather than under the control of the UN Security Council, which is much more easily manipulated by the United States and Britain.

### *The mandate*

Variations on this proposal have been made, for example, by veteran Iraq watcher Juan Cole, who in June 2005 proposed the sending of a peace-enforcing UN mission to Iraq, ‘as the US military withdraws’. Cole suggested that ‘the relevant model is the UNTAC experience in Cambodia, which, while it had substantial flaws, was also a relative success.’<sup>xi</sup>

Despite his emphasis at that time on the need for pro-active peace *enforcement*, and not merely peace *keeping* (which implies there is a peace already in place to be kept), Cole two years later envisaged a UN peacekeeping role, ‘perhaps with the OIC [Organisation of the Islamic Conference] (where Malaysia recently proffered troops)’: ‘Any UN or OIC presence would be for peacekeeping and could not be depended on for active peace-enforcing.’<sup>xii</sup> He has not, to my knowledge, offered an explanation for his change of heart on this question. Negotiating the mandate for the replacement force would no doubt be complicated (and perhaps this is why the TFF proposal does not specify what kind of mandate its suggested force would enjoy). My own view is that a more aggressive peace enforcement mandate may well be necessary, to avoid the horrors of UN inaction in the face of mass slaughter seen in other conflicts.

### *Popular support*

The chief difficulty with the UN replacement proposal is that it is not very popular at the grassroots in Iraq itself. In June 2004, a lifetime ago as far as Iraq is concerned, a poll by Oxford Research International found 58% of Iraqis expressing confidence in the UN. On the other hand, while 42% of those polled favoured a UN transitional government, 58% did not.<sup>xiii</sup>

More recently, in September 2006, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) poll found ‘little interest in the idea of replacing US-led forces with an international peacekeeping force’. Given three options, only 20% favoured the idea of “replacing US-led forces with an international peacekeeping force mostly from Islamic countries”. By far the most popular option in the PIPA survey—endorsed by 65%—was ‘withdrawing all foreign military forces from Iraq.’<sup>xiv</sup>

The problem is that immediate withdrawal is, as we have seen, precisely the proposal about which the Iraqi people seem to feel most troubled and ambivalent.

The idea of a replacement force has in the past been supported by both Shia and Sunni insurgents in Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mehdi Army called for UN troops to replace US forces in the run-up to the 2004 assault on Najaf, while in February 2007 a ceasefire proposal from Sunni insurgents indicated a willingness to accept the introduction of a UN peacekeeping force as US forces pulled out.<sup>xv</sup> Whether this kind of openness is still the case on either the Sunni or the Shia side, after the Sunni ‘Awakening’ and the acquisition of Sunni insurgent groups as US clients, is not clear.

### *Advantages and disadvantages*

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The value of calling for a UN replacement force is that it is a positive demand that gives some hope of genuinely assisting the Iraqi people, has some basis of support among crucial armed groups in the country, and might significantly reduce any post-occupation conflict.

The problem with a UN option is that, if introduced too early, it could become a fig leaf for the occupation. The UN option (if it becomes at all politically feasible) must be rigorously separated from the occupation. UN replacement should not be initiated until Washington and London have indicated their willingness to withdraw totally from Iraq.

### *Total withdrawal*

Total withdrawal means an end to the US/UK military, political and economic<sup>xvi</sup> domination of Iraq. The US Iraq Study Group<sup>xvii</sup> recommended that US-UK forces continue to occupy permanent bases in Iraq, on stand-by for special operations; US-UK aircraft continue to patrol Iraqi airspace, and to carry out surveillance, air support and airstrike operations; US-UK land-based artillery continue the bombardment of Iraqi cities, towns and villages; US-UK vessels continue to patrol the Persian Gulf and continue to use missiles (and possibly artillery) to attack targets inside Iraq; and US-UK "advisors" continue to train and direct locally-recruited forces. By its silence, it also endorsed the continuing use of mercenaries by the occupation forces. If these kinds of proposals are implemented, while we might see large-scale troop reductions, the US-UK war will not actually end, it will merely have changed its mode of operation.

A UN replacement force, if found acceptable to the Iraqi people, must only start to be assembled and deployed when and if Washington and London have committed themselves to unconditional and total military, political and economic withdrawal.

### *A process*

If the United States and Britain did come to the point where they were forced to commit publicly to total withdrawal, one possible process would be for:

- 1) The US and UK to commit to withdrawing all military forces within a certain period (less than one year) unconditionally;
- 2) The US and UK immediately to make a significant grant to the United Nations for the initial mobilization of forces for a UN replacement force;
- 3) The UN General Assembly to set up a committee for the management of any UN political and/or military assistance to Iraq;
- 4) Iraqi political forces to set in motion a UN-supervised referendum on the acceptability of a UN-sponsored replacement force, its possible composition, its mandate and its period of deployment (possibly renewable);
- 5) After some months of logistical preparation, UN forces to begin deploying as US/UK units withdraw.

### Conclusion

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This brief paper has focussed solely on the **military** dimensions of the UN option, and on the **goal** to be presented publicly. It has left aside many important aspects hinted at in the introduction. Even so, it has tried to define one of the major problems confronting the anti-war movement, and to put forward some positive proposals.

If the anti-war movement in Britain is to break through its shell of depression, it needs positive demands that meet the concerns of the majority of British people. The call for a UN replacement force has dangers and complexities, no doubt, but it offers a real opportunity to mobilize millions of people who are currently inactive, and who are unwilling to rally behind the demand to 'get out now'.

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<sup>i</sup> YouGov, 'Defence and Britain's role in the world', 4 April 2007  
<[www.yougov.com/uk/archives/pdf/TEL070101008\\_3.pdf](http://www.yougov.com/uk/archives/pdf/TEL070101008_3.pdf)>.

<sup>ii</sup> Iraq was the second-most-provoking issue in the poll, after 'lack of respect from young people'. Ipsos MORI, 'Are We An Angry Nation?', September 2007  
<[www.ipsos-mori.com/content/are-we-an-angry-nation.ashx](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/are-we-an-angry-nation.ashx)>.

<sup>iii</sup> This strategic move has been blocked largely by US pressure, it appears, leaving Britain in a two-war situation. It could also be argued that the British heads-down, delegate-to-Iraqi-clients strategy in southern Iraq is in part a response to opposition at home (a way of minimizing military and political costs). In which case there has been a modest benefit from the current level of anti-war opinion and organizing, as British policy, while often brutal, has been less harmful to local people than the US approach to counter-insurgency.

<sup>iv</sup> 15% plumped for 'Britain should keep troops in Iraq as long as is necessary to help Iraq build a peaceful democracy'. YouGov, 'Iraq Commission Poll', June 2007,  
<[www.yougov.com/uk/archives/pdf/Iraqtables070611C4.pdf](http://www.yougov.com/uk/archives/pdf/Iraqtables070611C4.pdf)>.

<sup>v</sup> YouGov, 'Britain's forces in Iraq and Afghanistan', 30 October 2006,  
<[www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/TEL060101020\\_3.pdf](http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/TEL060101020_3.pdf)>;

Julian Glover, Richard Norton-Taylor and Patrick Wintour, 'Iraq: voters want British troops home by end of year', *Guardian*, 24 October 2006,  
<[www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/oct/24/uk.iraq](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/oct/24/uk.iraq)>

<sup>vi</sup> See last footnote. The ICM poll asked for withdrawal 'by the end of the year', just three months later.

<sup>vii</sup> ORB, 'Iraqis Confident in Security but Concerned with Economy', 17 March 2008 <[www.opinion.co.uk/Documents/ToplinesIraqMarch'08.doc](http://www.opinion.co.uk/Documents/ToplinesIraqMarch'08.doc)>.

<sup>viii</sup> Gary Langer, 'Security Gains Reverse Iraq's Spiral Though Serious Problems Remain - ABC News/BBC/NHK/ARD National Survey of Iraq', 17 March 2008  
<[www.abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1060a1IraqWhereThingsStand.pdf](http://www.abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1060a1IraqWhereThingsStand.pdf)>.

<sup>ix</sup> See JNV, 'Iraq: Total Withdrawal and the UN Option', Iraq Commission, March 2007,  
<[www.channel4.com/news/microsites/I/the\\_iraq\\_commission/pdfs/jnv\\_submission.pdf](http://www.channel4.com/news/microsites/I/the_iraq_commission/pdfs/jnv_submission.pdf)>

<sup>x</sup> TFF, 'Towards Peace In and With Iraq', 16 August 2007,  
<[www.transnational.org/Area\\_MiddleEast/2007/TFF\\_Iraq\\_Peace\\_Plan.html](http://www.transnational.org/Area_MiddleEast/2007/TFF_Iraq_Peace_Plan.html)>.

This plan differs from the later TFF document of the same name published on 28 January 2008.

<sup>xi</sup> Juan Cole, 'The United Nations Strategy as a Resolution of the Iraq Crisis', 20 June 2005,  
<[www.juancole.com/2005/06/united-nations-strategy-as-resolution.html](http://www.juancole.com/2005/06/united-nations-strategy-as-resolution.html)>.

<sup>xii</sup> Juan Cole, 'How to Get Out of Iraq', *The Nation*, 23 April 2007,  
<[www.thenation.com/doc/20070423/cole](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070423/cole)>.

<sup>xiii</sup> The original file has been removed from the ORI website. Please view  
<[www.oxfordresearch.com/resources/Iraq+Oct+2003+to+Nov+2005+All+Surveys+Presentation.pps](http://www.oxfordresearch.com/resources/Iraq+Oct+2003+to+Nov+2005+All+Surveys+Presentation.pps)>

<sup>xiv</sup> PIPA, 'Most Iraqis Want U.S. Troops Out Within a Year', 27 September 2006  
<[www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/250.php?nid=&id=&pnt=250](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/250.php?nid=&id=&pnt=250)>

<sup>xv</sup> *Independent*, 9 February 2007, <<http://tinyurl.com/ysbvah>>. See the JNV submission to the Iraq Commission, listed in note 9, for more details.

<sup>xvi</sup> The US and UK owe Iraq reparations for damage done by sanctions, war and occupation, but these should be channelled through an independent third-party rather than being a potential means of influence. The TFF proposal for the payment of 'a one-time lump sum in the order of US\$ 250-500 billion' would reduce the risk of manipulation.

<sup>xvii</sup> Iraq Study Group Report, 6 December 2006, <<http://www.usip.org/isg/>>.