

Iraq: Two Flavours of Defeat

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AG - Patrick Seale - The choice in Iraq for the United States and Britain is no longer between staying or leaving. It is a choice between an honourable exit and a scuttle -- that is to say a precipitate and undignified withdrawal, most probably under fire, as occurred in Vietnam a generation ago.

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The U.S. coalition must withdraw. The way to do this is by organizing a regional support group and helping the Iraqi army in regaining its essential responsibility for security and stability.

Proposals for an Iraq Exit Strategy

Patrick Seale

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Few policy-makers in Washington and London are yet prepared to accept this gloomy conclusion. It is too unpleasant to contemplate, and too damaging to the self-regard of a superpower and its principal European ally. Some still believe, against all the evidence, that some form of 'victory' can still be salvaged from the wreckage -- perhaps by divine intervention since, according to President George W. Bush, America is 'good' and its enemies are 'evil.'

But the facts on the ground are unforgiving. So far this month 75 American soldiers have been killed bringing the total since the start of the war in 2003 to close to 3,000. Another 25,000 to 35,000 have been wounded in mind or body, most of them seriously. They will not see combat again. The war has so far cost the U.S. tax-payer at least \$400 billion, with the price tag going up by \$9 billion a month.

As for Iraqi casualties, they are so horrifying as to suggest genocide. A distinguished team of American doctors from Johns Hopkins University has estimated that 655,000 Iraqis have died

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from war-related injuries and disease between March 2003, the date of the U.S. and British invasion, and July 2006.

President Bush has attempted to discredit this finding, as it is a devastating indictment of his policies. But no serious scientist has challenged the figures, or the methodology on which they are based. They were published in the British journal, *The Lancet*, considered the most prestigious and reliable medical journal in the world.

Quite apart from the human tragedy, the other costs to Iraq are beyond computation -- the hundreds of thousands that have fled abroad, including much of Iraq's middle class; the internally displaced numbering close to one million; the colossal physical damage to buildings and infrastructure; the loss of oil revenues; and perhaps above all the splintering of Iraqi society by the violent resurgence of sectarian conflict.

What is to be done? In both the United States and the UK, a serious rethinking of policy is underway. Teams of officials, as well as many non-official experts, are bending their minds to finding a way out of the Iraqi quagmire. They are looking for ideas. The following are some tentative suggestions.

1. The United States and the UK should announce a firm date for a full military withdrawal from Iraq. This should include the closing of all bases. There should be no residual military presence. Such an announcement would go a long way to meeting the principal demand of all the various strands of the insurgency and focus Iraqi minds on national reconciliation.

2. Iraq's neighbours -- Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, as well as Turkey and Iran -- must all be involved in the search for an Iraqi settlement. No one has a greater interest in the emergence of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Iraq.

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3. Their involvement could begin by taking the form of a high-level conference in a neutral, non-Western location -- say, Singapore or Malaysia. The aims of this conference would be first, to make a solemn call for a cessation of hostilities in Iraq; and secondly, to thrash out a compromise regarding the sort of power-sharing regime for a unitary Iraq these neighbours would like to see emerge in Iraq.

They could form a contact group pledged to do their utmost to implement the agreed compromise.

4. The contact group would then summon the leaders of all the parties, factions, militias and insurgent groups in Iraq to another conference, perhaps under United Nations sponsorship, with the aim of securing their public commitment to the agreed compromise.

5. Implementation will, of course, be difficult. It can probably not be achieved without some form of armed force, which has to be Iraqi. In other words, an Iraqi national army -- free, as far as possible, from political, ethnic or religious affiliations -- must be reconstituted and given the task of restoring public order.

From the creation of the Iraqi state in 1921, the Iraqi army was the most important single institution holding the country together. It was purged several times -- in 1936, 1958, 1963, 1968, and during the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88, but it remained throughout the backbone of the state.

One suggestion would be to form a neutral army council of six respected generals and give them the task of rebuilding a truly Iraqi army from all the trained men at present available, whatever their past.

6. The United States should commit itself to contributing \$10 billion a year for five years to an

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Iraqi reconstruction fund, to be disbursed under UN control, and should encourage others (the Gulf States, China, Japan, the European Union, Russia, etc.) to contribute also.

The vast embassy which the United States is now completing in Baghdad -- far too big for America's future diplomatic needs in Iraq -- could be donated to the Iraqi people as a university campus.

Patrick Seale is a leading British writer on the Middle East, and the author of *The Struggle for Syria*; also, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*; and *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire*.

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