

# Iraq: “Strategic Redeployment” vs. “Out Now”

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**Whatever the limitations of Rep. Murtha’s call to redeploy U.S. troops from Iraq that we have already emphasized (“On John Murtha’s Position,” ZNet, Nov. 21), he went much too far for most Democrats or for the Bush administration. Nevertheless, there have been others who have urged the redeploying of some of the U.S. forces in Iraq.**

In October, Lawrence Korb and Brian Katulis, writing for the Center for American Progress, a liberal organization headed by Clinton’s former chief of staff John Podesta, issued a report calling for what they termed “strategic redeployment.” (Lawrence J. Korb and Brian Katulis, *Strategic Redeployment: A Progressive Plan for Iraq and the Struggle Against Violent Extremists*, Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, October 2005.)

Like Murtha, Korb and Katulis (who served in the Reagan and Clinton administrations, respectively) make telling observations. For example, they note that:

*“most Iraqis do not want us there and they do not feel our presence makes them safer. One half says they support insurgent attacks on coalition forces and a majority says they feel less safe when foreign troops patrol their neighborhoods, according to polling of Iraqi citizens sponsored by the US government earlier this year.”*

They conclude, however, that what is needed is a “strategic redeployment,” specifically rejecting “calls for an immediate and complete withdrawal.” Under their proposal, during 2006, 46,000 national guard and reserves would be returned to the United States, 20,000 troops would be sent to other theaters (18,000 to Afghanistan, 1,000 to Southeast Asia, and 1,000 to Africa), and 14,000 troops would be stationed in Kuwait and off-shore in the Persian Gulf.

The 60,000 U.S. troops remaining in Iraq would be redeployed away from urban areas to minimize inflaming Iraqi opinion. By the end of 2007, most of these troops would be withdrawn (to unspecified locations), leaving only “counterterrorist units.”

*“This presence, along with the forces in Kuwait and at sea in the Persian Gulf area will be sufficient to conduct strikes coordinated with Iraqi forces against any terrorist camps and enclaves that may emerge and deal with any major external threats to Iraq.”*

Some analysts (for example, Slate’s Fred Kaplan) have suggested that Murtha got his plan from Korb and Katulis, though he speeds up their timetable and moves his entire residual force out of Iraq. But the same reasons given in our original essay for why the anti-war movement should avoid confusing Murtha’s position with its own apply with even greater force to the Korb-Katulis position.

Korb and Katulis wisely point out that to enhance U.S. security President Bush should announce that the United States “will not build permanent military bases in Iraq, counteracting arguments made in recruitment pitches by militants and Iraqi insurgents.” But where are the U.S. counterterrorist units

in Iraq going to be housed if not at bases?

In any event, it's not just designs on military bases that need to be disavowed, but plans to dominate Iraqi oil too, which are proceeding apace. (See Greg Muttitt, *Crude Designs: The Rip-Off of Iraq's Oil Wealth*, London: PLATFORM with Global Policy Forum, Institute for Policy Studies [New Internationalism Project], New Economics Foundation, Oil Change International and War on Want, November 2005.) And a two-year timetable is unacceptable.

As we noted earlier, two to three months is plenty of time to remove all U.S. troops, if that is one's genuine interest. Protracted "timetables" only make sense if one is trying to secure a continuing dominance over Iraqi politics and resources before leaving.

In the *Washington Post* of November 26, Joe Biden of Delaware, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and an aspiring presidential candidate, wrote an oped column entitled "Time for An Iraq Timetable." Biden declared that in 2006 U.S. troops

*"will begin to leave in large numbers. By the end of the year, we will have redeployed about 50,000. In 2007, a significant number of the remaining 100,000 will follow. A small force will stay behind - in Iraq or across the border - to strike at any concentration of terrorists."*

Biden's language is interesting - he doesn't quite call for this, but essentially predicts it. His prediction seems to be based on the fact that the Senate by a vote of 79-19 and over the objections of the White House adopted an amendment requiring the President to provide quarterly reports on the progress of U.S. policy and military operations in Iraq. (This vote took place after the Senate defeated a Democratic-sponsored amendment asking the president to prepare an estimated timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.) Given that the successful amendment has no teeth at all, it's hard to see why it presages much of anything.

Nevertheless, Biden's comment is consistent with various hints from the Bush administration itself. Obviously the Republicans don't want to go into the 2006 elections, let alone the 2008 elections with an increasingly unpopular and seemingly endless occupation of Iraq on display.

In part this leads them to make optimistic comments about how soon Washington will be able to reduce the number of troops in Iraq (glossing over the fact that several thousand troops were added before the October 15 referendum, so a withdrawal of these would indicate no progress at all). During the Vietnam War there were countless optimistic predictions of when the troops would come home, only to have the president send more troops when the situation deteriorated further. And we've been hearing similar optimistic comments from the Bush administration for more than two years; for example, on October 19, 2003, the *Washington Post* reported on its front page:

*"There are now 130,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. The plan to cut that number is well advanced.... and has been described in broad outline to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld but has not yet been approved by him. It would begin to draw down forces next spring, cutting the number of troops to fewer than 100,000 by next summer and then to 50,000 by mid-2005, officers involved in the planning said."*

True, in 2003 Iraq was nowhere near the political liability for the Bush administration that it is now, so we shouldn't discount the prospect of a real policy shift. Clearly the Bush administration has scaled back its more grandiose goals in Iraq, but it's unlikely that it would choose to withdraw its forces without being confident that it could secure its more basic goal - domination of the oil resources of the region - unless, of course, this were made untenable.

It is possible that the U.S. will fall back on a strategy of trying to replace its troops with air power,

hoping that the reduction in U.S. casualties will make the war more palatable to the American public. In late August, the head of the air force told the *New York Times* that after any withdrawal of U.S. ground troops, "we will continue with a rotational presence of some type in that area more or less indefinitely," adding "We have interests in that part of the world..." (Eric Schmitt, "U.S. General Says Iraqis Will Need Longtime Support From Air Force," Aug. 30) To support these interests Washington is upgrading 16 different bases in the Middle East and Southwest Asia (*New York Times*, Sept. 18, 2005).

According to Seymour Hersh in the Dec. 5 *New Yorker*, plans are being drawn up precisely to replace U.S. ground troops in Iraq with warplanes. Hersh reports that some Pentagon officials are worried about what it would mean to have Iraqis calling in bombing targets to the U.S. air force, but no matter who calls in the coordinates, white phosphorus, cluster munitions, and 500-pound bombs are not going to address the problem of the insurgency; indeed, they are going to generate more recruits for both the insurgency and terrorism.

For the anti-war movement, it is critical to insist on the *complete* withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces, from Iraq and from the region, because retaining any of them - whether counterinsurgency units ready to intervene or air power to level further Iraqi cities - will violate Iraqi sovereignty and continue to fuel insurgency and hatred. And the anti-war movement must insist as well on *immediate* withdrawal, because the Bush administration itself will soon be talking of future drawdowns - and indeed it already is.

We should bear in mind that the mere fact that the antiwar movement raises the "Out Now" slogan does not mean that U.S. forces are going to leave Iraq overnight. During the Vietnam War, a much more powerful movement than anything we have seen in the U.S. in the last few decades demanded that U.S. troops get "Out Now."

This did not lead - even when the U.S. power elite reached the conclusion that the war should be terminated - to a "precipitous" withdrawal, but to a withdrawal that was completed only after the Paris Accords were concluded with the three main Vietnamese parties involved. Nevertheless, the pressure of the antiwar movement in the U.S. was decisive in compelling Washington to opt for this withdrawal.

The issue with "Out Now" is therefore not about the logistical details of withdrawal, but about how to be most effective in countering Washington's imperial aims. "Out Now" is a slogan around which one can build a large coalition of forces, from those who only care about "our boys" to those who care about the Iraqi people's freedom, whereas any dilution of the "responsible exit strategy" kind - aside from the fact that it would be extremely difficult even to agree on what the "conditions" for the withdrawal should be - would only provide the Bush administration, along with pro-war Democrats, an argument for justifying the protracted presence of U.S. troops.

We are not calling for a "cut and run" withdrawal, abandoning Iraq to its fate (like in the "selfish" nationalist rhetoric of the isolationist Right). We are perfectly aware that, given what the United States has been doing in Iraq, tragically disrupting the situation in that country, if the U.S. troops were just to leave Iraq suddenly, say in 48 hours, without prior notice, that would definitely create a dangerous chaotic situation. But this is not what we are demanding.

The demand for the immediate withdrawal of the troops is, first of all, a demand for an immediate political decision to withdraw the troops. Once the political decision is taken and proclaimed publicly, it becomes possible, in fact indispensable, to prepare the best conditions for its implementation in the shortest possible timeframe, while starting without delay to bring troops back home. To be sure, the modalities through which this should be completed in a way not to harm the

Iraqi people must be worked out with their elected representatives.

If Washington were to make clear that it wants to complete the withdrawal of its troops within a timetable stretching over weeks, or very few months, this would provide a very powerful incentive for the Iraqis to reach an agreement among themselves on a way to run their country together peacefully and start to concentrate their efforts on the huge task of its reconstruction.

The consensus reached at the recent Cairo conference is an important step in that direction and proves that it is perfectly possible, and much easier indeed, to reach such agreements when U.S. representatives are not there constantly interfering and calling the shots.

Finally, those who accuse the antiwar movement of wanting to “cut and run” and pretend that they care more for the interests of the Iraqis - whereas most of them are actually worried about U.S. imperial interests - would be better advised to demand that the U.S. respect Iraqi sovereignty over Iraqi natural resources and reconstruction.

For our part, we believe that there is a moral obligation for the U.S. government to pay reparations to the Iraqi people for all that they have suffered as a consequence of U.S. criminal policies - from the deliberate destruction of Iraq's infrastructure in the 1991 war to the devastation brought by the present invasion and occupation, through the green light given to the Ba'athist regime to crush the mass insurrections of March 1991 and, above all, the murderous embargo inflicted on the Iraqi population from 1991 to 2003.

The withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces, the end of U.S. economic domination, and the payment of reparations: this is the way to truly serve the principles of justice, as well as the best interests of the people of Iraq and the U.S. population.

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## **P.S.**

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