



## Iraq: Planning for an American Withdrawal

Amir Taheri

Colaboraciones n° 1044

June, 26 2006

In the spring of 2003, President George W Bush went aboard an American warship to declare the end of major fighting in Iraq. A banner used as the backdrop to his speech asserted "Mission Accomplished!"

For the past three years, those opposed to the toppling of Saddam Hussein have used that speech and that banner to taunt Bush and claim that the "mission" in Iraq remains unaccomplished.

There are signs that some within the Bush administration itself have come to share that belief. The result is that they analyse the situation in Iraq in purely military terms, and plan and act as if they were still fighting to achieve victory.

The fact, however, is that the initial mission, that is to say the toppling of the regime and the dismantling of its machinery of war and repression, has

been accomplished. In that sense the controversial banner unfurled on that warship was exact.

Today, the US-led coalition is not fighting to achieve victory but to protect its victory against those who challenge it. That challenge might continue for months, even years. However, it has no chance of undoing the victory achieved by the US-led coalition in April 2003; the Saddamite regime cannot be restored. Nor does the smorgasbord of Saddamites, Jihadists and bandits challenging the new Iraq have the slightest chance of seizing power in Baghdad. New Iraq is like a caravan continuing its journey towards its destination while it is attacked at its rear and on its flanks by wolves and bandits who might kill and rob but cannot stop the caravan's progress let alone alter its course.

It is, therefore, important to launch a new phase in the Iraqi project: that of stabilisation and reconstruction. That means shifting the emphasis from the

military aspects of the project to "nation-building".

The first step in that direction is for the new Iraqi government to establish a strategy that, while providing for the ultimate defeat of the terrorist insurgency, mobilises the nation's resources for a massive, and overdue, economic revival.

One signal that the emphasis is being shifted from the military aspects of the project to nation-building would be agreement on the status of the coalition forces. The coalition is present in Iraq under a United Nations mandate that ends in December. Because Iraq now has a sovereign government, the mandate can no longer be extended by the UN.

The new Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has a number of key decisions to take within the next few weeks. It must come up with a plan for defeating the insurgency and restoring security to those parts of the county still targeted by terrorism. Within that plan, it must decide the role that coalition allies would have to play, and the troop levels required.

My guess is that a strong American and allied commitment is still needed for at least another four years- that is to say until after the next general election in Iraq.

That commitment would serve three purposes.

First, it would act as a deterrent to those of Iraq's neighbours that harbour a desire to intervene in its affairs. Secondly, the US can serve as

shoulder on which leaders of the various Iraqi parties and factions can cry until they develop a new culture of democratic politics and compromise. Finally, the coalition is still needed to help build Iraq's new army and police- a task that might take four to five years.

How many troops might be needed for such purposes?

It is too early to tell.

As far as a symbolic commitment is concerned, a few brigades might be sufficient. And, when it comes to training, a small number of specialised units could do the job.

Right now, the coalition has around 140,000 troops in Iraq. Because some members of the coalition, notably Italy and Poland, are dropping out while a couple of others want to reduce their presence, that number may be lower before the year ends. The fact that the coalition has already transferred two-thirds of its 109 bases in Iraq to the new Iraqi army is a sign that a significant reduction in troop numbers is in the cards.

My guess is that the new Iraqi government and parliament would seek a form of strategic partnership with the US and its principal allies in the coalition, notably Great Britain, modelled on the one negotiated by President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan. This would enable the coalition to maintain four or five bases in Iraq: one in each of Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish regions, and another close to Baghdad. The base at Balad, the nerve centre of the coalition's presence, may

also be retained. The number of coalition troops in Iraq may be down to 30,000 to 40,000 by next year.

A force of that size, although numerically small, would be sufficient for the purposes spelled out. We must also remember that six Arab states now have special partnership arrangements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) while the US maintains a military presence in eight other Arab countries plus Turkey. Such facts are important in ensuring an environment of regional security in which the new Iraqi system can strike roots and grow.

The success of such plans, however, is predicated on one imperative: the re-emergence of the Iraqi army as a credible factor in a complex security mix.

Despite much effort by the coalition and the Iraqi transitional government, one still has a feeling that neither is prepared to provide the degree of commitment needed.

The three post-liberation governments, led by Iyad Allawi, Ibrahim al-Jaafari and now al-Maliki, have talked a good talk about building the new army but have fallen short when it has come to taking the decisions needed and allocating the resources required. All have talked of disbanding the various militias, a key step in making the new army credible, but taken no concrete steps. The rebuilding of the defence Ministry and the Iraqi

Central Command has been slow and marked by zigzags. And, at the time of writing, Iraq still does not have a defence minister. The decision to exclude all former Ba'athist officers from the new army has been partly abandoned in practice. Ali-Maliki would do well to lift the ban altogether. People should be judged as individuals in their current state of existence and not on the basis of what was a compulsory party membership under a totalitarian regime.

The Americans, for their part, must start providing the new Iraqi army with new and efficient weapons. A few weeks ago the new Iraqi army received a gift of 77 Soviet-made tanks from Hungary, a NATO member. In exchange, the Hungarians will receive brand new US-made tanks. This makes no sense because Iraq needs good tanks more than Hungary, which is not threatened by anybody. It is also interesting that the US is ready to supply the most sophisticated weapons to some of its other Arab allies while trying to build the new Iraqi army with Kalashnikovs and antiquated RPGs. And need we note that there are more Algerian officers being trained in the US than Iraqis?

As the coalition heads for negotiations with the new government in Baghdad it must show that it is prepared to treat new Iraq differently. And differently should mean better.