

Policy Options

The U.S. in Iraq: Confronting Policy Alternatives

An important debate is taking place in the United States concerning U.S. policy in Iraq. This is an issue that has been ongoing for several years. At this point in the conflict, discussion is focused on the question of the U.S. presence in Iraq. What is our purpose? How long should we stay? What does this mean for the larger question of America's role in the world today? What follows are three policy "Options" that frame the current debate. They are designed to help you think about a range of possible policy directions and the ramifications of each.

The three options are put in stark terms to highlight very different policy approaches. Each option includes some underlying beliefs, goals, and policies. Each also includes a set of criticisms designed to help you think carefully about the tradeoffs involved.

It is important to understand that the options here do not reflect the views of any one political party or organization. It is your job to sort through the three options presented, deliberate with your peers on the strengths and challenges of each, think about your own concerns and values, and then frame an "Option 4" that reflects your views.

As you develop your own option for current U.S. policy concerning Iraq, think about the following questions:

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What is the history of U.S. relations with Iraq? With the wider Arab world?
- How is the American presence in Iraq perceived by Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds in the country? By the wider Arab and Muslim worlds? By our European allies? By other parts of the world?
- How should we understand the results of creating a constitution and establishing a democratic government in Iraq? What do these efforts tell us about the future of Iraq?
- * How important should the welfare of the Iraqi population be in determining U.S. policy?
- * What effect does U.S. policy toward Iraq have on the issue of terrorism? On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? On other international concerns?
- * What bearing does this issue have on our relations with "rogue" states—with or without weapons of mass destruction?
- * What bearing does it have on domestic policy?
- * What steps should the United States take in the coming months?
- * What should our longer term goals be?
- * What values are important to you?
- * What are the strengths of your option? What are the arguments against it?



You may find the set of policy options discussed prior to the Iraq War a useful tool. A summary is available at www.choices.edu/iraq03_summary.cfm

Finally, you are encouraged to participate in an online ballot activity focused on the question of the role the United States should plan in the world. The ballot is available at www.choices.edu/usroleballot.

OPTION 1: Increase our presence in Iraq and secure our interests.

Iraq is free of Saddam Hussein's brutality and the world is free of the threat posed by this ruthless dictator. Iraq has taken the first halting steps towards establishing a democracy. The January '05 elections and the newly approved constitution are important steps in this direction. These are unprecedented developments in an important region filled with extremists and authoritarian governments.

These events would not have happened without U.S. leadership. They have taken place because the United States decided to confront the murderous ideology of Saddam Hussein and those who hate America. When the world community was unwilling to confront the threat of Iraq, we took the lead. While important international partners joined us in the war against Saddam Hussein, this was nonetheless a U.S.-led and almost completely U.S.-financed operation. Many Americans have died to bring liberty and democracy to Iraq. We have an obligation to honor their memory and sacrifice by staying the course.

Iraq continues to need our help, and stability in the region depends on our presence there. The Iraqi government alone does not have either the experience or the resources to defeat the many forces aligned against it. And this situation is only getting worse. If the insurgency is going to be stopped and a stable environment created, we must bring more U.S. forces into Iraq to exert control over all security, intelligence, and infrastructure. To undermine popular support for the insurgency, we must invest more in basic infrastructure, public health, and education. We should continue to rely on American companies to take the lead in rebuilding the country's infrastructure. We should pay particular attention to securing and rebuilding Iraq's oil industry in order to ensure a steady supply of oil to world markets and to get the Iraqi economy back on its feet. No matter how long it takes or how costly it is, we must continue to work with the new Iraqi government to develop and train Iraqi police and security forces as well as other public service officials. We must also prepare the new Iraqi leadership to accept a continuing U.S. presence in Iraq to ensure that Iran (a country with an illegal nuclear program) does not try to further expand its regional influence and power.

Stability in this troubled region is a national security priority for the United States. An Iraq that plunges into chaos will be a security threat to the United States and our allies in the Middle East. With thousands of U.S. soldiers stationed across the Middle East, we cannot afford to lose an area as significant as Iraq to extremism. On the other hand, an Iraq that is stable and democratic in the heart of the Middle East will be a boon to U.S. security. Rebuilding a stable and democratic Iraq will be a complex and costly process, but we must not waver from the continuing struggle against insurrection, terror, and sectarian violence.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 1

- As the driving force in the war with Iraq, we have the right to determine the nature of the peace as well as the responsibility to ensure that peace arrives in the area.
- Only strong U.S. leadership and a continued U.S. presence can create a stable Iraq that is not a threat to our interests and provides a bulwark for democracy in the region.
- Iraq harbors terrorists like those who attacked us on 9.11. We need a strong presence there militarily and ideologically.

Goals of Option 1

- Establish lasting order in Iraq—in the form of a democracy—in order to protect U.S. economic and security interests in the region and those of our friends and allies.
- Ensure a long-term U.S. presence in the new Iraq and establish a stable relationship with the government so that we can monitor any growing security threats.
- Demonstrate to rogue states that we do not intend to allow them to threaten U.S. interests with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or terrorist tactics.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Increase U.S. troop strength in Iraq in order to defeat the insurgents and destroy terrorist networks.
- Cultivate relationships with Iraqi officials whom we trust to support our interests.
- Establish support from the Iraqi population by rebuilding infrastructure, such as reconstructing roads, securing water supplies, and providing constant electricity.
- Work with Iraqi officials to see that American companies get first priority to oversee the rebuilding effort.
- Build up Iraq's oil industry in order to pay for reconstruction efforts and ensure a steady flow of Iraqi oil to world markets.

Arguments Against Option 1

- Establishing a stable and more democratic government in a country with no longstanding tradition of a democratic process, a destroyed economy, and intense religious and cultural rivalries, is unlikely to succeed whether we stay for two years or for twenty.
- Iraqis, not Americans, must determine their own future. Forcing our will on the Iraqi people will only fuel resentment against the United States as an occupying nation, create a 'no-win' situation for Iraqis trying to reach compromise solutions, and continue to drive the rest of the international community away.
- Our continued military presence in Iraq lends credence to the arguments of those who accuse us of colonialism or imperialism in the region, and fans the flames of anti-Americanism in Iraq, in the region, and around the world. The longer we stay, the more we create a breeding ground for terrorism and increase the risk of terrorism against us.
- An unstable Iraq is not only a threat to our security but to that of others as well. However, if we continue to insist upon doing things only our way, we will never find a way to lessen the anger and distrust that many in the world community feel toward us and they will never be willing to contribute to the rebuilding effort.
- In order to quell the insurgency and secure Iraq, we will need more troops than we have there now. But army recruitment numbers are down, our export of military hardware and personnel (especially using National Guard units) to Iraq has already reduced our capacity to deal with disasters at home, and increasing numbers of Americans are calling for troop withdrawals. The only way to significantly increase troop numbers is to institute a draft and neither the U.S. military nor the American public will support this.
- Our continued presence in Iraq strains relationships with countries whose cooperation we need for the war on terrorism and reduces our credibility and trustworthiness on the global stage.

OPTION 2: Provide the Iraqis with the means to succeed and set a timetable to withdraw from Iraq.

Saddam Hussein is no longer in power. In January 2005 Iraqis held their first multi-part elections in fifty years, in October they approved a new constitution, and in December they voted for their first full-term government. The Iraqis have taken the first brave steps towards determining their own future. Yet Iraq faces an uncertain future with strong Sunni opposition to the new constitution and the insurgency growing. While there has been progress toward a more free and democratic Iraq, this journey will take many years—perhaps even decades. Iraq today is characterized by disorder and chaos and it does not appear that our presence is making things better.

Whether we were right or wrong to go into Iraq without the backing of the UN is no longer the question; we did. As the leaders of the coalition that removed Saddam Hussein from power, it is now our responsibility to follow through on our commitment to help the Iraqi people reign in the chaos that has overrun many parts of the country and establish a government of their choice. We hope that the government they establish will be a democracy, but we must accept that the democracy Iraq builds may not resemble our own.

We must do what we can to support the Iraqi people in their efforts. However, there are many factions in Iraq that resent us. Our continued military presence serves as a rallying cry for opposition and a recruiting tool for the insurgents. The most constructive thing we can do now is set a timeline for our withdrawal and agree to provide the necessary resources to the Iraqi authorities so that they can establish their own security institutions and political structure. To accomplish this, we should redouble our efforts to train and reconstitute the Iraqi military and police force and provide them with the tools to ensure internal security, give the Iraqis the resources to rebuild their economy, and stick to a timeline for our withdrawal. Only these steps will demonstrate to the Iraqis that we are committed to their success but do not intend to remain as occupiers in their country. These steps will also demonstrate to the international community that we are prepared to reestablish ourselves as partners in world affairs. Forcing our will on the Iraqi people only fuels resentment against us in Iraq and around the world, and creates a ‘no-win’ situation for Iraqi leaders who need to be able to demonstrate their independence from the U.S. as they try to build a democratic government that is supported by all factions in Iraq.

Finally, we owe it to our troops to establish clear goals that can be achieved in as short a time as possible, not forty or fifty years down the road. The price we have paid in Iraq has been high; we cannot continue to pay it indefinitely. We must put our faith in the Iraqi people, provide them with the support they need to rebuild their country, and set a clear timetable for our own withdrawal.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 2

- Having taken the lead in going into Iraq, we have an obligation to provide the Iraqis with the resources they need to regain control of the country and establish a stable government of their choosing.
- We may hope for a democracy in Iraq that is similar to our own, but ultimately it must be the Iraqis who determine their own future.
- While it would be irresponsible to just pick up and leave Iraq, the presence of our military forces in Iraq is providing fuel for increased anti-Americanism and for opposition to any new government that appears to be aligned with us.

Goals of Option 2

- Reduce the American presence in Iraq and bring our troops home within two years.
- Support Iraqi efforts to gain control and establish a stable government that does not threaten security in the region.
- Reduce anti-Americanism in the region and improve our relations with the international community.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Establish a timetable with defined stages and a clear end date for withdrawal of our military forces in Iraq.
- Train and equip the Iraqi army so that they can provide for the security of the country.
- Pour the necessary resources into reconstituting and training the Iraqi police force in the principles of democratic policing.
- Provide the necessary resources to help Iraqis upgrade and protect their oil industry as quickly as possible so that they can use funds from this to rebuild their economy.
- Solicit cooperation from Iran and Syria in order to help stabilize Iraq.
- Cooperate with the Iraqi government to help it realize democratic goals through constitutional reform, rule of law initiatives, institution building, and the development of civil society.

Arguments Against Option 2

- If we establish a timetable for withdrawal, yet continue to pour resources into Iraq, we could find ourselves supporting a fundamentalist government that is a threat to our interests.
- If we solicit the cooperation of Iraq's neighbors such as Iran and Syria, we will weaken our position on other issues such as nuclear weapons, terrorism, and Lebanon.
- If we withdraw but provide military equipment to Iraqi forces—as we will have to if we expect them to take control over the insurgents in Iraq—we could find this equipment used against us or our interests in the future.
- Any continued U.S. military presence, even with a clear timetable for withdrawal, will fan the flames of anti-Americanism in the region, thus making the region increasingly unstable for our troops and our long-term interests.
- We have started the process of democratization in Iraq at great expense to us and to the Iraqis. We owe it to ourselves and to them to complete the job. We cannot withdraw prematurely.
- With Saddam Hussein out of power, no WMDs found, and no clear connections between Iraq and Al Qaeda, Iraq poses little threat to the United States. We should not allow Iraq to continue diverting attention and resources from the more pressing threats of terrorism and al-Qaeda.

OPTION 3: Withdraw from Iraq now.

The war in Iraq was initially justified by a range of issues including the search for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, the threat of further terrorism, and the desire to establish democracy in the region. Saddam Hussein is no longer in power, no WMDs have been found, and it has been clearly determined that there was no link between Saddam Hussein and the 9.11 attacks. Meanwhile, our continuing presence in Iraq only increases anti-Americanism and fuels terrorism against us and our interests in the region and around the world. Finally, while democracy may be a worthwhile goal, the difficulties Iraqis had constructing a new constitution suggest that it may simply be out of reach.

While some may feel that Iraq still has the potential to become a democracy, for now chaos reigns. We have been in Iraq for more than three years. Almost three thousand American soldiers have already died there and more die every day in attacks by Iraqi insurgents. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have also died in the conflict. Meanwhile, hatred and resentment of the American presence is widespread, ethnic and tribal rivalries are fueling more violence, and the country is descending into civil war. The longer we stay the worse things seem to get. By remaining in Iraq we are attracting more recruits to the cause of the insurgents, making it increasingly difficult for the Iraqi government to establish control. There is little we can do to make things better.

Our presence is not only hurtful to those in the region but it also continues to fan hatred of the United States. As the attacks of September 11, 2001 demonstrated, our foreign policy practice has bred resentment against us and created enemies intent on doing us harm. By remaining in Iraq, our troops are vulnerable to reprisals from individual terrorists and angry Iraqis, and we are increasing the possibility of attacks on U.S. interests at home and abroad.

Finally, our commitment in Iraq has diverted U.S. attention and resources from problems within our own country. Our resources have become stretched too thin, leaving us ill prepared to respond when disaster strikes. The slow reaction to Hurricane Katrina demonstrates that we are not adequately prepared for emergencies at home. Why should this continue? There is little more that we can accomplish by staying and the costs are mounting. The Iraqis must resolve their own deep-seated differences and determine their own future. It is now time for us to bring our troops home and refocus our resources and attention on our economy and on security at home.

Underlying Beliefs of Option 3

- Whether we were right or wrong to have invaded Iraq in spring 2003, remaining in Iraq now only serves to fuel anti-American sentiment and feed terrorism. This runs counter to our security interests.
- The situation in Iraq is out of control and unmanageable for the U.S. military. The United States is an occupying power and will not succeed in Iraq. If we stay longer we will only be digging a deeper hole that will be harder and harder to get out of—a “Vietnam” in the desert.
- Like any other nation, our first obligation is to our own people. We have so many needs here at home that we cannot afford to expend our resources on dubious causes in other areas of the world.

Goals of Option 3

- Reduce our visibility and military presence in the region to avoid inciting further terrorism and violence against Americans.
- Bring our troops and equipment home from Iraq and focus our attention and resources on our own needs at home, including the recovery effort in the South and homeland security.
- Focus our attention abroad on working through multilateral institutions such as the UN to promote our objectives through diplomacy and assistance.

U.S. Policies to Achieve these Goals

- Announce that we are withdrawing from Iraq and begin procedures to bring troops home immediately.
- Reduce our dependence on Middle East oil by encouraging American oil companies to invest elsewhere and by promoting alternative sources of energy and energy conservation.
- Redirect our resources to address economic and security needs here at home.

Arguments Against Option 3

- Leaving Iraq at this moment would likely lead to one of three consequences: (1) other states in the region such as Iran or Syria, which have supported terrorism, might step into the vacuum; (2) full-scale civil war might break out among the various internal factions, potentially pitting Sunni and Shia Muslims and Kurds against one another; or (3) a radical Islamic fundamentalist regime might seize control as the Taliban did in Afghanistan.
- If left unaddressed, the poverty and disorder that are now rampant in Iraq will be a breeding ground for further terrorism. As the ones who led the war on Iraq, the United States will be the focus of these new terrorists.
- Iraq may not have been behind the 9.11 attacks, but Iraq is now the front line of the war on terrorism. If we don't fight the terrorists in Iraq, we will be forced to confront them elsewhere, maybe even on our own shores.
- Almost three thousand American soldiers have given their lives and many more have sacrificed to rid the world of Saddam Hussein and make room for democracy to take root in Iraq. If we leave now we will not only be losing the opportunity to establish democracy in the heart of the Middle East, but we will also be dishonoring their sacrifices.
- Having damaged Iraq's infrastructure and thrown out its government, we have a moral obligation to provide the resources to rebuild the country. No one else is going to do this if we don't.
- The United States is heavily dependent on Middle East oil to supply its energy needs. If we abandon Iraq now, our access to oil from this region will be at risk.

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