

Iraq Occupation Focus

Submission to the Iraq Commission, June 2007

Summary

1. After four years of worsening violence, it is clear that prolonging the occupation of Iraq will not deliver security for the people of Iraq.
2. Opposition to the foreign troop presence in their country is very strong amongst Iraqis and appears to be on the rise. Attacks against UK troops by Iraqi resistance forces are also on the rise.
3. Attacks on US and UK troops are linked to the widespread belief that the US intends to maintain forces in Iraq permanently, regardless of the wishes of the Iraqi government. Violence in Iraq is likely to intensify until an end to the occupation is announced.
4. The UK troop presence is the one factor amongst several responsible for violence and instability within Iraq that our country has the power to neutralise. We should withdraw our military forces from Iraq completely and immediately.
5. The task of normalising the situation of those Iraqis held in detention by US and UK forces is integral to ending the occupation and restoring Iraqi sovereignty. All detainees must be either rendered to Iraqi jurisdiction or released.
6. The UK has, as has been stated on countless occasions, a 'duty' to Iraq. But that duty is to address the appalling human and physical damage caused to Iraq as a result of our government's decision to invade in March 2003 – not to prolong a military presence that is rejected by the Iraqi people and which is the cause of much of their suffering.
7. Most urgently, the UK should make a concerted effort to address the plight of over four million displaced Iraqis – a refugee crisis that is now an international emergency. This should include offering shelter within the UK for a proportion of those displaced, as well as aid within the region.
8. The UK must also join forces with Iraqi agencies and international experts in locating and removing unexploded munitions and toxic remnants of war.
9. Withdrawing our troops does not entail abandoning the Iraqi people, as defenders of the occupation often claim. It simply means abandoning our futile military struggle with the Iraqi resistance, allowing us to focus instead on delivering humanitarian, medical and economic assistance for the people of Iraq. A change of this sort in UK policy towards Iraq would both help to relieve that nation's suffering and repair some of the damage to our own nation's reputation.
10. The UK's influence in the Middle East and in the wider world would also benefit from this suggested change in policy. British diplomacy has been hamstrung in recent years by the perception that we are, at best, hypocrites and, at worst, war criminals.

Military involvement

11. After four years of worsening violence, it is clear that prolonging the occupation of Iraq will not deliver security for the people of Iraq. Few outside of the government's ranks would now disagree, whatever their original view on the invasion itself. It is not merely that the presence of US-led forces over the last four years has been seemingly unable to prevent the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians in post-invasion violence. Military operations by the occupiers are actually responsible for a shameful proportion of those killings.
12. Opinion polls carried out inside Iraq indicate that ordinary Iraqis also see the occupation as the problem and want it to end swiftly. A poll conducted in September 2006 showed that 78 percent of Iraqis, including 82 percent of Shias, believed that the presence of US-led forces in Iraq was "provoking more conflict than it is preventing."¹
13. Political opposition to the presence of foreign troops is growing more organised in Iraq. There is now a vocal 'nationalist' majority in the Iraqi parliament that is actively challenging the prime minister's support for a foreign troop presence. The parliament has recently passed a binding resolution to ensure that it will be consulted on any future extension of the troops' official mandate. Iraq's parliamentarians hope to use this new power to override Prime Minister al-Maliki and bring about an end to the occupation.² The argument that our troops are in Iraq "at the invitation of the democratically elected government of Iraq" is wearing thinner all the time.
14. Iraqis are deeply suspicious of the motives and intentions of the foreign occupiers. There is a widespread, and understandable, fear that the US and UK intend to stay rooted in Iraq for decades to come and to maintain permanent military bases in the country in order to exercise long-term control over the region and its oil. Two polls conducted last year showed that almost 80 percent of the overall population believe that the US was intending to create permanent military bases in Iraq and that they would ignore any requests to leave issued by the Iraqi government.³ The stubborn refusal of the US and UK governments to countenance any discussion of withdrawing from Iraq, even on an extended timeline, simply reinforces these suspicions.
15. Support for acts of resistance to the occupying forces, including military resistance, is widespread among the Iraqi population. Poll evidence on the issue suggests that, in some Iraqi provinces at least, the majority support attacks on British and American troops and that this support is on the rise.⁴ When the political backers of the occupation

¹ WORLD PUBLIC OPINION, "Most Iraqis Want U.S. Troops Out Within a Year", 27 September 2006. Similar findings have emerged in other surveys.

² Raed JARRAR and Joshua HOLLAND, "Iraqi Lawmakers Pass Resolution That May Force End to Occupation", *AlterNet*, 5 June 2007.

³ Surveys conducted for World Public Opinion in January and September 2006 (see references).

⁴ A poll conducted in August 2005 for the MoD found that "Forty-five per cent of Iraqis believe attacks against British and American troops are justified - rising to 65 per cent in the British-controlled Maysan province" and "82 per cent are "strongly opposed" to the presence of coalition troops". Sean RAYMENT, "Secret MoD poll: Iraqis support attacks on British troops," *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 October 2005. Two polls conducted for World Public Opinion in

demonstrate so little willingness to pull out of Iraq, it is hardly surprising that Iraqis are either taking up arms to attempt to drive them out by force or supporting those who do.

16. Resistance attacks against UK forces in southern Iraq have risen. According to Ministry of Defence figures, the number of attacks on British troops in the six months to April 2007 was 1300, compared to 500 in the previous six-month period.⁵
17. It is self-evident that military resistance to the occupation will not cease until the occupation itself draws to an end. Those politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who look to US and UK troops to 'quell the insurgency' through military operations are therefore looking in vain. Levels of resistance activity may fluctuate over time, and the occupation's political backers may attempt to seize on any relative lulls as a sign of 'progress', but it is impossible for the occupiers to emerge victorious in such a conflict. The tendency of military occupations is to descend into a cycle of violence, arousing increasing hostility from the host population as time wears on. In other words, conflict and bloodshed on both sides is likely to get worse the longer our troops remain in Iraq.
18. Anecdotal evidence suggests that members of the UK's military force in Iraq are increasingly aware of the futility of their mission. As General Sir Michael Rose recently told Newsnight, 'It is the soldiers who have been telling me from the frontline that the war they have been fighting is a hopeless war, that they cannot possibly win it and the sooner we start talking politics and not military solutions, the sooner they will come home and their lives will be preserved'.⁶
19. The UK government's perennial argument that announcing a timetable for withdrawal would invite more attacks is unsubstantiated. When asked, Iraqis feel differently. In a September 2006 poll, most of those who supported resistance attacks on US-led forces said they would feel less supportive 'if the United States made a commitment to withdraw from Iraq according to a timetable'.⁷
20. Since the fall of Saddam's regime in April 2003, Iraq has descended into an ever-worsening state of violence and insecurity. It is true that, by now, there are other factors at work in inciting violence besides the US-led forces and the resistance that counters them. But our presence as an occupying force remains one of the most, if not the most, significant catalyst for the spiraling violence in Iraq. It is also the only factor that it lies within our power to remove. The UK government has no authority to order al-Q'aeda to cease operations in Iraq, and holds little sway with the Mahdi army. What it can do is bring about the swift end of an occupation that has gone disastrously wrong – even by the dismal standards of military occupations past. Immediate withdrawal from Iraq by US and UK forces would be both pragmatic and just. It would provide the first chance for a

2006 found 47 percent overall support for attacks on US-led forces in January, rising to 61 percent by September – including 62 percent of Shias (see references).

⁵ Written answers from the Secretary of State for Defence, cited by Michael MOORE MP in the Iraq Inquiry Debate, 11 June 2007.

⁶ Julian BORGER, "UK and US must admit defeat and leave Iraq, says British general", *The Guardian*, 3 May 2007.

⁷ WORLD PUBLIC OPINION, "Most Iraqis Want U.S. Troops Out Within a Year", 27 September 2006.

sovereign and democratic Iraq to emerge and the best hope for its return to peace and stability.

21. As a first step, UK military personnel in Iraq should immediately cease all operations in the country and retire to their bases. Arrangements should then be made for them to leave the country within weeks. Military bases and installations set up within Iraq by the UK's occupying forces must be permanently dismantled.
22. The UK government should then focus its diplomatic efforts on persuading the US administration to follow this example.

Refugees

23. The war and occupation have led to the worst refugee crisis ever seen in the region. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are now 2.2 million Iraqis outside of Iraq who have fled the country since March 2003, in addition to more than 2 million who are displaced inside the country. These numbers are still growing at a rapid pace; 'Syria alone receives a minimum of 30,000 Iraqis a month'.⁸
24. International agencies have highlighted the precarious situation of displaced Iraqis. 'The United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq and the World Food Programme indicate that at least 47 percent of the displaced have no access to official food distribution channels'.⁹
25. The UK, along with other donor nations, must heed the calls of the UNHCR for financial assistance in order to meet the needs of the growing Iraqi refugee population. The UNHCR and other relevant agencies should be enabled to provide aid packages for internally displaced Iraqis and those who have fled the country, including emergency accommodation, education and medical services, financial assistance, legal representation, etc.
26. While Syria and Jordan have shouldered the burden of accommodating the swelling Iraqi refugee population, the UK has been slow to offer shelter – even to those Iraqis who face reprisals for having worked for UK forces in Iraq. The UK government should demonstrate the goodwill it so often claims to feel towards the Iraqi people by taking in a proportionate percentage of the refugee population, and organising their transport to and accommodation in this country. This would go some way towards improving the perception of our country both in Iraq and in the world at large.
27. There is a widespread perception that our government is neglecting its humanitarian duty toward Iraq's refugees out of a sense of political embarrassment. Acknowledging the existence of the refugee crisis would, after all, constitute a damning indictment of this military adventure. Needless to say, this highly plausible explanation does little to foster respect for UK policy in the eyes of the world.

⁸ UNHCR, "Number of Iraqi displaced tops 4.2 million; shanty towns mushroom", 5 June 2007.

⁹ Source as above.

28. Besides failing to help recent refugees, the UK government has been conducting forced deportations of refugees long resident in the UK to Iraq's northern Kurdish provinces. Whilst Iraq is turmoil, the UK government must adopt an attitude of consideration and respect towards Iraqi refugees. Claiming that Iraq is a safe environment to which former refugees should now return is absurd; forcing them to do so is inhumane. It is worth stressing that the human rights situation in Kurdish controlled regions of Iraq is deteriorating steadily and what democratic freedoms may have been won in recent years are under severe pressure from a profoundly corrupt political leadership.
29. As an occupation partner, the UK must step up to its responsibility in facilitating the return of the Iraqi refugees to their homes as soon as possible.

Detainees

30. So far, only a handful of cases of detainee abuse by British forces in Iraq have hit the headlines in our national media, but we must fear that these represent a small proportion of the total. UK forces have been responsible for rounding up and detaining many thousands of Iraqis during their four-year occupation of southern Iraq. The incontrovertible cases of documented abuse are condemned with near unanimity. But the strange situation of a foreign army seizing and detaining sections of the civilian population at will, and holding them indefinitely without charge, trial or access to legal representation, has aroused little concern amongst our politicians and mainstream commentators. It is, nevertheless, an outrage to human rights that differs little from the horrors of Guantanamo Bay. For Iraqis, the frequently arbitrary seizure and mistreatment of friends and family members by the occupation forces is one of the principal sources for the ever-rising resentment and hostility towards the US and UK presence in their country.
31. The UK government should take urgent steps to normalise this situation. Doing so will demonstrate this country's commitment to the rights and freedoms of the Iraqi people, and to their national sovereignty.
32. As a first step, all jails operated in Iraq by UK forces must be declared and made open to scrutiny. The staff of the Red Cross and Red Crescent must be able to carry out monitoring of UK-run prisons without delay or impediment.
33. The whereabouts of all detainees must be made known to their families and representatives. All detainees should be permitted regular visits and access to legal representation.
34. The human rights of prisoners and detainees must be rigorously policed by the Iraqi authorities. Jailers and interrogators - Iraqi or otherwise - must be held fully accountable in Iraqi courts whenever evidence of abuse is found.
35. Any detainees who have been arrested by Iraqi citizens for crimes under Iraqi law should have their cases processed in a manner consistent with legal norms. If there is evidence

to support a prosecution, detainees should be able to expect a fair trial under Iraqi jurisdiction.

36. Any other detainees held by UK forces in Iraq should be released without delay, and should, in due course, receive compensation for their unlawful imprisonment.
37. Iraqis who have been active in resistance activities against the occupying forces - military or otherwise – ought to be regarded as prisoners of war and should not face punishment for such actions. Iraqis who are currently detained because of involvement or suspected involvement in actions against the occupying forces must be released without charge.

Helping to clean up Iraq

38. Successive wars and years of occupation have left a deadly legacy in Iraqi soil. The remnants of both unexploded munitions and depleted uranium (DU) tipped weaponry pose a long-term risk to Iraqi health. The UK shares a heavy burden of responsibility with our American military partners to locate and clean up these remnants. If we shirk this duty, there is a high probability that Iraqis born decades from now will still be suffering dire health problems and injuries as a result of military action that we carried out in Iraq in 2003 - or indeed earlier (DU was used extensively during the 1991 Gulf War). The tragedy of Vietnam, where children born today are still suffering from the use of Agent Orange as a weapon in a war that ended more than thirty years ago, should not be repeated due to our negligence.
39. The Ministry of Defence should promptly disclose full details (dates, quantities, map references etc.) of every instance where UK forces have deployed cluster bombs and DU tipped ammunition within Iraq. This disclosure should extend back to 1991.
40. The UK government should also co-operate fully with Iraqis in sharing all expertise likely to assist in cleaning up the remnants of these weapons and should meet all requests from Iraq for personnel to carry out clean-up operations.
41. The UK government should step back from its tradition of blanket denials that DU poses any risk to human health. A moratorium on the military use of DU by UK armed forces should be imposed immediately. Our government ought to actively promote and facilitate scientific co-operation between international experts in the diseases, syndromes and defects linked to DU contamination in Iraq in order to bring about a speedy understanding of causes, treatments and preventative measures.

About Iraq Occupation Focus

Iraq Occupation Focus is a London-based campaign group that aims to:

- campaign to end the occupation of Iraq and provide practical solidarity for Iraqis;
- disseminate information in Britain about the realities of the occupation; develop and publicise the arguments for ending the occupation; research and highlight the reasons for British involvement;
- work to secure more accurate and comprehensive coverage of the realities of the occupation in the British media;
- build direct links with and support Iraqis struggling for democracy and independence.

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