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Iraq: The Way Out

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Jonathan Steele:

Thank you all for coming. What I want to do this evening is to outline briefly why Iraq is in such deep crisis, and explain why the US-led occupation has failed. Finally I will sketch out how I think the country's dire situation can be alleviated, if not resolved.

I have been to Iraq on eight different occasions since the invasion of March 2003. Each time I stayed for an average of about a month, in Baghdad, Basra, and most recently in Kurdistan and the north. On each occasion I found the security situation worse. On each occasion, at least in the Arab parts of Iraq, I found massive dissatisfaction with the performance of the Americans and the British.

So why has it gone so wrong? The vast majority of Iraqis were delighted to see Saddam Hussein toppled. Why then has their liberation produced so much dissent and so much instability? Over the last five years dozens of books have appeared which try to answer those questions. Some were written by other journalists, including many of my colleagues and friends. Others were by diplomats, and former officials of the occupation, the so-called Coalition Provisional Authority, the CPA. At least one other eagerly awaited book has been written which has not been allowed to appear. I'm referring, of course, to the one written by our chairman this evening.

You may well wonder how anyone could find anything new to say on the issue. While I was writing this book, I sometimes had the same thought myself. But I suppose I felt provoked to write this book, and to call it in no uncertain terms, *Defeat*, by an increasing sense of alarm. I don't primarily mean alarm at what was going on In Iraq, although the human tragedy there is colossal, and Iraq is correctly described as the world's biggest humanitarian catastrophe.

My specific sense of alarm arose from what I felt was happening here in Britain. As time has gone on since the invasion, a conventional wisdom, or if you like, a kind of orthodox narrative, has got stronger and stronger. It seemed to me not only wrong but extremely dangerous. If Britain was to avoid repeating the disaster of Iraq, the right lessons needed to be drawn. So this book is a deliberate challenge to the conventional wisdom of what has gone wrong with the Iraqi occupation.

You all know the arguments, but let me quickly rehearse them. Argument number one is that the United States went into Iraq without a plan. Argument number two is that it made a series of stupid blunders like disbanding the old Iraqi army and dissolving the Baath party. The point is encapsulated in the

titles or subtitles of two recent books. One is subtitled *Winning the War but Losing the Peace*. Another book is called *Squandered Victory*. More recently there was a TV programme here in Britain, called *No Plan, No Peace*.

I'm not of course denying that the CPA made a series of major mistakes which helped to compound Iraqi anger, disappointment, and opposition. But it's important to analyse the ‘No plan, no peace’ argument carefully. Its central assumption is that there could have been a way to have a successful occupation. If it had been more sensitive, more efficient, and better managed, it would have worked out all right.

But just stop and think for a minute. Do people really believe that a Western army can successfully maintain an open-ended occupation of an Arab country in the twenty-first century and not face mounting opposition? Occupations are inherently unpopular. People don't like seeing foreign tanks in their midst. They don't like seeing foreign troops on their streets. There's been a century-long history of Anglo-American intervention in the Middle East, and Iraqis were bound to treat a new intervention and a new occupation with suspicion. Yet most American and British officials barely acknowledged this. The first opinion poll conducted after the invasion found that from the very first day more Iraqis saw it as an occupation than a liberation.

This was true in Basra as well as Baghdad. When resistance began, American and British officials were reluctant to admit it was coming from Iraqis. They preferred to believe it was largely orchestrated by foreigners. I remember attending a briefing for British journalists in the British embassy in June 2004 led by Lt General John McColl, the deputy commander of multinational forces and the most senior British officer in the occupation.

We were startled by what we heard. A PowerPoint presentation referred to problem people known as AIF. Queried about the acronym, the officer conducting that part of the slideshow spelt it out as ‘Anti-Iraqi Forces’. There was a collective intake of breath among the reporters, and one of us asked whether ‘anti-coalition forces’ or perhaps ‘anti-government forces’ might not be more accurate. The resistance was, after all, Iraqi. General McColl jumped in and tried to smooth over the embarrassment by telling us the acronym was not a British invention or exclusive to today’s briefing. It was standard usage in the US-led coalition. We wondered whether this did not make it worse. If the coalition did not even start by accepting that many Iraqis saw legitimate reasons for resistance, how could the Americans and British ever win people’s hearts and minds? News photographers often took pictures of Iraqis dancing in delight after US Humvees were struck by explosives and set on

fire, but it was not until December 2006 that a high-level public document, the Iraq Study Group report, often known as the Baker-Hamilton report, mentioned the uncomfortable fact that 61% of Iraqis approved of attacks on US forces.

How could this happen? One reason was that Paul Bremer, the head of the CPA, and the first American overlord in post-invasion Iraq, had the wrong template. He, and most other officials in the Bush administration, took as their model the open-ended American occupations of Japan and Germany in 1945 which met no resistance. The historical circumstances were different and in the Japanese case the Americans chose to maintain the Emperor in office as a symbol of national dignity and continuity. This soothed Japanese pride. Iraq was a quite separate case yet Bremer thought Japan was relevant. In his memoirs Bremer spelt it out unambiguously: ‘We had to build a success story here that, like Germany and Japan, still looked good after fifty years’. Bremer and his colleagues almost seemed to forget that Iraq was in the Middle East. They didn't seem to realise that they were treading on old colonial ground.

Most Iraqis were delighted to be rid of Saddam, but like other reporters who were in Baghdad in the first days of the occupation we saw how the Iraqi mood quickly changed. Iraqis wanted to know when the Americans were leaving and why they stayed around once Saddam was gone and it became clear he had no WMD. Iraqis began to suspect the American project was imperial. Its goal was to control Iraqi oil and use the country as a strategic base.

But most CPA officials never spoke to a cross-section of Iraqis. Hunkered down in the Green Zone in Baghdad, or the mini-Green Zones in the provincial capitals, they mainly talked to Iraqis who had an interest in being nice to the CPA. These were Iraqis who wanted CPA money to pay their own salaries or to give them grants to finance civil society projects.

These were not the sort of people who would readily criticise the occupation. As journalists living outside the Green Zone and travelling in those early months freely throughout the country without any fear of being kidnapped, we heard a broader range of views. None of this Iraqi alienation need to have happened if the Americans had left Iraq quickly, but they didn't.

So the biggest US blunder was not dissolving the Iraqi army. It was to maintain an open-ended occupation with no date for withdrawal. Let me just quote Kanan Makiya, the influential Iraqi exile whose book about Saddam's atrocities, the Republic of Fear, helped to influence the neo-cons... Makiya was a passionate advocate of invasion. He was received at the White House.

But after much agonising he recently came out with the view: and I quote: 'The first and the biggest American error was the idea of going for an occupation'.

If the US and British government's most controversial pre-war decision was to go to war after ignoring the will of the United Nations Security Council, their behaviour after the invasion was just as badly flawed.

Instead of handing Iraq to United Nations peacekeepers or, better still, to Iraqis themselves to choose their government, George Bush and Tony Blair persuaded the Security Council in May 2003 to adopt resolution 1483 to authorise a prolonged occupation by the invading powers. By then, sadly, the war's strongest initial opponents, France, Germany, and Russia, seemed exhausted by their pre-invasion battles with Washington. There was also relief that Saddam had been toppled with relative speed. The anti-invasion troika had little stomach to go on resisting Bush, beyond the important limit of refusing to contribute their own troops to the quagmire into which they rightly expected the so-called 'multinational force' was bound to sink.

Resolution 1483 did give the UN a role, but it was very much as a junior partner to the coalition. The UN was described as being in Iraq to facilitate, encourage, promote, and help. The UN's first representative in Baghdad, Sergio Vieira de Mello, understood Iraqi attitudes much better than most CPA officials. He made a point of meeting a wide cross-section of civil society as soon as he arrived in Baghdad in June 2003. He always drew attention to the hardships which a decade of sanctions had imposed on Iraq. A large part of the Americans' unpopularity in Iraq was caused by sanctions which Iraqis blamed the US and Britain for. Bremer never mentioned them. De Mello saw his priority as helping Iraqis recover their independence.

Under the Security Council resolution which authorised the UN presence in occupied Iraq, his job was to work with Iraqis in restoring representative government. He interpreted this as part of a process that would get the Americans to leave. Only if Iraqis began to feel that the occupation of their country was coming to a speedy end would there be a reduction in the sense of humiliation which was creating the resistance, he believed.

I had known de Mello in Kosovo and East Timor, and during the two months he was in Iraq before he was killed I saw him for two long talks. He told me in no uncertain terms that as long as the occupation continued Iraqis would go on condoning rather than condemning attacks on the Americans.

The second time we spoke was just after Saddam's sons, Uday and Qusay, were killed. The Americans were over the moon. They thought their deaths

would minimise the resistance. De Mello rightly predicted it would not, since the resistance went well beyond the former Baathists.

Although the Americans always claimed that they had to remain in Iraq in order to defeat the resistance, this was a case of putting the cart before the horse. The Americans were not in Iraq because of the resistance. The resistance was there because of the Americans.

I saw that in Fallujah less than three weeks after the statue of Saddam was toppled in Firdous square in Baghdad. The proud largely Sunni city of Fallujah had liberated itself. The Baathists had gone to ground. The old mayor had been expelled, and local imams and tribal sheikhs had elected a new man to take his place. The police force was beginning to resume its duties. Suddenly the US 82nd Airborne Division arrived in town, set up a heavily fortified guard post next to the mayor's office, mounted road blocks and stopped traffic around the town and took over a local school as a barracks. One evening a crowd gathered outside the school demanding the Americans leave the school. The school was ready to re-open and they wanted their kids to go back after the three-week suspension during the invasion.

What happened next is contested. The Americans claim people in the crowd started firing, which compelled them to reply. Local eyewitnesses to whom I and other reporters spoke say the Americans over-reacted and panicked. The evidence seemed to support the local people's case. We could see no bullet marks on any part of the school, but the houses opposite were pockmarked with gashes and large holes from heavy-calibre weapons. Seventeen Iraqis were dead.

American officers claimed there were pro-Saddam provocateurs in the crowd. The new mayor also told me he thought Saddam loyalists were paying young people to make trouble but he was sure most people in Fallujah were happy the dictator was gone. The dominant mood of the protests had not been in favour of the old regime, he said. Many shouted, ‘No to the US. No to Saddam.’ Others chanted, ‘God is great. America is God’s enemy.’

I asked Lt Col Eric Nantz of the 82nd Airborne whether he had ever considered keeping his troops on the edge of Fallujah rather than occupying a school in a suburb. He replied: No, I never considered that at all. We want the Iraqis to build themselves up and you can’t help them do that if you’re sitting outside. Our way is to be inside and help them build a police force and so on. We had no idea we weren’t wanted.

That revealing phrase – We had no idea we weren't wanted could be the epitaph for the whole occupation. The Americans and British never took on board how mistrusted and unpopular they were.

The brief but bloody US incursion into Falluja contained all the ingredients for the tensions that subsequently led to full-scale armed resistance. More than a dozen people lay dead because of clashes between Iraqi nationalism and what was at best American insensitivity and at worst an American drive to impose foreign control over a proud Islamic city. With hindsight, it was the spark that lit the insurgency.

There were other reasons why resistance grew in Sunni areas. Regular public statements by coalition officials that Sunnis had dominated Iraq under Saddam and that it was time for them to relinquish power helped to create a feeling of collective punishment. Many Sunnis had opposed Saddam.

The Iraqi Islamic party, a largely Sunni party, had been banned under Saddam, and many of its members went to prison. Nor was Saddam's Baath party an exclusively Sunni affair. Many of its top people were Shia. So when coalition officials said it was time to disempower Sunnis because of their links with the Baath party, it made all Sunnis feel like victims and turned many of them into active supporters of the resistance.

The heavy-handed counter-insurgency used by the Americans in Falluja in April 2003 were repeated throughout western Iraq. Far from reducing the insurgency, they helped to increase it. The Iraq Body Count, the respected independent research group, which collated and checked media and other reports of civilian deaths, calculated that occupation forces killed at least 266 civilians in the three weeks of April after Saddam's regime collapsed.

Over the next year the number of civilian victims of US violence rose dramatically. Between April 2004 and March 2005 as they intensified their counter-insurgency campaigns occupation forces killed 2,096, almost four times the previous year's toll. These figures do not include people shot in incidents where insurgents and US troops exchanged fire. They only cover unarmed people who were killed by occupation troops or aircraft.

The two-year toll of roughly 2,600 civilians killed by the Americans in the first two years of the occupation is four times higher than the number of Iraqis killed over the same period by car-bombs and suicide attacks by anti-occupation forces. Terrorist car bombs were given prominent media coverage since most took place in Baghdad where photographers and reporters had immediate access to scenes of carnage. As a result, readers and TV viewers had the impression that car bombs were the main danger for Iraqis.

In fact, away from the cameras in the smaller towns and the countryside, the Americans were taking more lives. If one assumes that every victim has five close family members, the degree of hatred against the Americans which these deaths caused is clear.

The occupation was equally unpopular in Shia areas, according to most opinion polls. This went against the pre-war assumptions of the Bush Administration. As preparations for the Iraq invasion accelerated throughout 2002, Washington assumed the Shias would be keen supporters.

They had risen up against Saddam at the end of the first Gulf War and been brutally repressed. Thousands of Shias were gunned down by Saddam's helicopters. The leaders of the uprising were arrested and executed. Their revolt was not confined to south-eastern Iraq. It erupted in the poor, overcrowded, and largely Shia Baghdad suburb of Saddam City, where crowds overwhelmed police stations and offices of the intelligence service, the Mukhabarat, before being beaten back.

Now that a new opportunity for liberation was emerging twelve years later, Bush's officials believed, Shias would surely welcome it.

Washington's second assumption – shared by the British – was that Shias would eagerly participate in the transition to Iraq's first free administration once Saddam had been toppled. Their demographic majority would guarantee them the leading role in the new parliament. The United States would insist that Shias were fully represented in all branches of government, and Washington's plans for democratic elections were likely to produce a Shia majority in parliament and the committees that drew up a constitution. As a result, Shias would be grateful to the coalition.

The US assumptions were dramatically wrong on several counts.

Decision-makers in Washington and London failed to appreciate three crucial factors. Feelings of Iraqi nationalism were just as strong among Arab Shias as among Arab Sunnis, with the result that Shia support for liberation would not guarantee support for occupation. Support would have to be earned. It could not be taken for granted.

Secondly, the Americans and British did not see that while there was a coincidence of view between them and the Shia leaders over the value of electoral democracy, this did not translate into majority Shia backing for the secular politics of the exiles whom the Americans hoped to see take-over. The dominant forces in the Shia community were Islamists and they saw elections as a simple device for introducing their own sect's permanent rule.

They were not well disposed towards political compromises, let alone a system in which individual rights rather than sectarian solidarity had the upper hand.

The third point was that the Shia Islamists were not united. There were three powerful trends among them, and as these trends competed with each other for recognition and authority within the Shia community, one major terrain for rivalry would be the degree to which any group or leader was seen to be pro- or anti-American. It would be hard for any Islamist leader to endorse a Western occupation and retain his credentials as a good Muslim. Not just in Iraq but throughout the Middle East many Arabs turned to Islamist parties precisely because of their frustration with the long history of Western intervention and what they saw as its disrespect for their culture and traditions. Iraqi Shia co-operation with the occupying authorities would be grudging at best. It was likely that many Shias would choose to confront them – especially if Washington and London refused to give any signal that they would soon be withdrawing their forces and leaving Iraqis to run Iraq themselves. The rise of Moqtada al Sadr's Mahdi army is eloquent proof of that.

The occupation is now five years old. During that time the nature of Iraq's catastrophe has changed. I have concentrated this evening on the role of the United States and Britain. But since 2004 Iraq has suffered a growing involvement by Al-Qaeda militants, whose aim seemed to be to kill Shia civilians and stir up sectarian conflict.

The bombing of the Al-Askariya shrine in Samarra in February b2006 launched a wave of tit-for-tat sectarian murders. The Shia-dominated police took an increasing role and there have been credible reports of death squads linked to the Ministry of the Interior.

Conflicts have grown more intense within the two main sectarian groups. Two rival militias, the Badr brigade, and the Mahdi army of Moqtada al Sadr, have been battling for control of the main towns in the South-east and the Shia districts of Baghdad.

Among the Sunnis there are now three armed movements: the Iraqi nationalist resistance groups, of which there are at least twelve; secondly al Qaeda in Iraq, and finally the so-called Awakening movement which began in towns in Anbar province and has spread to Diyala and Nineveh. The dividing lines between these movements are fluid and individual militants may move from one group to another.

I now come to my second challenge to conventional wisdom. It concerns British policy. There's a fashionable view here in Britain that it was all the Americans' fault. Britain's experts in the Foreign Office – so it is said – saw what an invasion was likely to lead to, but for various reasons they either did not convey their thinking to ministers, or – if they did, they weren't listened to.

Well, if only that were the case. In the last few months I've interviewed a range of recently retired Foreign Office diplomats who were in office in 2002 and 2003. They now feel freer to talk about what was going on in Whitehall. They suggest that with few exceptions the Britain's Arabists got things wrong. Some foresaw that the occupation would act as a magnet for al Qaeda. They did not foresee there would be armed resistance by Iraqi nationalists. They did not understand that the politicians who would fill the post-Saddam vacuum would be Islamists, many of them linked to Iran.

They did not see clearly enough that the Bush/Blair dream of establishing a liberal, secular, stable, and pro-Western regime in Baghdad was nothing but a castle in the air.

Let me just quote one British ambassador who was serving in the Middle East and came back to London in January 2003 and talked to colleagues about the looming invasion. He told me: ‘Everyone was underprepared for the aftermath. To my shame I was in the complacent camp. We underestimated the insurgency. I didn't hear anyone say: ‘It'll be a disaster, and it'll all come unstuck’. People felt it was a leap in the dark but not that we were staring disaster in the face’.

Or take the words of Christopher Segar, who took part in the pre-war discussions and headed the British office in Baghdad after the invasion. He told me ‘The conventional view was that Iraq was one of the most Western-oriented of Arab states, – with its British-educated, urban, and secular professionals. I don't think anyone in London appreciated how far Islamism had gone, not just among the Shia, but the Sunnis too’.

At least two former ministers who were in the Cabinet at the time have revealed that the Cabinet never saw any position papers or analysis on the likely consequences of invading Iraq. My own interviews with Foreign Office diplomats produced no evidence that accurate analysis even reached the Foreign Secretary.

Perhaps my informants did not know the whole story. Some members of the earlier generation of Foreign Office Arabists have expressed surprise at the

apparent lack of expertise or courage among their successors. Others point to the absence of a British embassy in Baghdad since 1991, which meant that by 2003 the corps of officials with experience of Iraq was tiny.

The same was true for the Americans, who also closed their embassy on the eve of the first Gulf War. So the irony is that the two countries most keen on an invasion, the United States and Britain, were the two countries who had least on-the-ground information about Iraq. The Germans, French, and Russians all had embassies in Baghdad in the Saddam's last decade.

Some former officials complain that budget cuts have reduced the Foreign Office's policy planning teams. Crisis management has replaced strategic thinking. Others talk of the Downing Street monopoly of decision-making on big issues, which began with Thatcher, and a creeping culture of civil service subservience – 'give the minister what he/she wants to hear and don't raise difficulties'.

The only way to get the truth is to have a full-scale inquiry. What did the government's experts really say and write? Why didn't they go beyond Whitehall and consult specialists outside? What questions did ministers ask? The government must take the brave step of opening itself to scrutiny.

This is not the stuff for some History PhD. Invading and occupying Iraq has been the greatest British foreign policy blunder since Suez. If the mistake is not to be repeated, we need to know how it happened, and we need to know it now.

Let me now turn to Iraq's future and what can be done to extricate Iraq from the current mess. The Bush administration's plan appears to be to maintain a large contingent of US troops on an open-ended basis while continuing the current policy of training the new Iraqi national army. It claims that putting in an extra 27,000 US troops – the so-called surge – has worked.

It is certainly true that there has been a welcome drop in attacks on Iraqi civilians over the last five months, though they are still high, averaging around a thousand a month. The surge is not the only factor.

There are a number of causes for that. One is the growing revulsion by Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq's western province of Anbar against the strategy and tactics of al Qaeda in Iraq. Whether its policy of attacking Shia civilians and Shia shrines is motivated by Salafi ideology which sees all Shias as infidels or whether it is more practical and aimed at destabilising Iraqi society by provoking civil war, al Qaeda's performance is rejected by an increasing

number of Sunni leaders. This applies not only to those Sunni leaders who are represented in the Iraqi parliament.

It also applies to tribal sheikhs and imams who support the Iraqi national resistance. They have all now turned against Al-Qaeda. This trend, known as the Awakening movement, began in Anbar before the US surge.

The second factor in reducing casualties is the unilateral six-month ceasefire announced by the Shia militia leader, Moqtada al Sadr. It's been in force for five months so far and has been substantially honoured. His Mahdi army has not fought the Americans, and the local gangs who seem to pay him loyalty without necessarily being under his command also seem to have reduced their reprisals on Sunnis.

Thirdly, the scope for sectarian killing has reduced. The killing rate in Baghdad has dropped dramatically. In January last year almost 1,000 bodies were found in the city, showing signs of execution after torture. By December the number was done to 120. How has this happened? The sad fact is that most of Baghdad's mixed neighbourhoods have gone. Minority communities, both Sunni and Shia, have fled to areas where they are in the majority and feel safer. Local vigilante groups patrol the streets to keep out strangers, with or without the help of US troops.

As for the reduction in American troop casualties, one final point needs to be made. Last year the US high command increasingly turned to airpower to confront the insurgency in an effort to reduce the losses of US ground troops. So while US casualties have gone down sharply, deaths among Iraqi civilians caught up in fights between insurgents and the US have gone up. The independent monitoring group, the Iraq Body Count, calculates that in 2006 up to 623 innocent non-combatants were killed by US air strikes.

Last year it was more that double at 1,326. The victims of these air attacks included 88 children.

Coming back to the surge policy, its most important aspect may be what it tells us about the shift in US military thinking. US commanders have realised that all politics are ultimately local. The initial US strategy was to build up the Iraqi national army and use it alongside US troops to try to pacify Iraq. But it has been painfully clear that the national army does not represent Iraq's population. Some of its divisions are Kurdish.

Others are overwhemingly Shia – very few Sunnis have joined, or been encouraged by the Shia-dominated national government to join.

The senior US commander, General David Petraeus, realised that the only way to try to get peace in Sunni areas was to go down to the tribal level and work with local sheikhs, even with ones who used to sponsor attacks on US troops. The policy of paying and arming them makes sense, even though it is highly risky. Critics point out that in building up local Sunni militias to confront al Qaeda, US may just be arming people who will revert to attacking the Americans or at a later stage go on the offensive against the Shia militias. In other words, the Americans may be stoking the fires of a future new civil war.

This localisation of Iraqi politics reflects the increasing irrelevance of national politics since the occupation started. We often talk sneeringly about the Green Zone in Baghdad as a symbol of the Americans' isolation from the lives of ordinary Iraqis. It is just as much a symbol of the Iraqi government's own isolation and impotence. Iraqi ministers and most MPs live in the Green Zone, spending their time on haggling over legislation with little relevance to most people's daily lives.

Charles Tripp, the historian of Iraq, recently quoted one Iraqi as saying ‘The United States got rid of one Saddam only to replace him with 50’. ‘For many people’, Tripp argued, ‘negotiating their way around and through the little Saddams with their militias, detention centres, local courts and taxes has become a fact of life. Some accept this as the price of increased security for their community, neighbourhood or even street. Others who refused to conform, but knew the price in blood for dissent, have fled’.

What, then, can be done? Even if civil peace were to break out in Iraq tomorrow, the country is so traumatised and wounded that it will take a long time to heal it. Two million people have gone abroad, many of them the country's most talented people. A million and a half have been displaced inside Iraq after losing their homes. A whole generation of children has grown up in the shadow of fear and insecurity. At least 150,000 people were killed in the first three years of the occupation according to the World Health Organisation. Putting the country back together will take many many years.

It will require a huge international effort. The pre-condition has to be an end to the occupation and a complete withdrawal of foreign troops. Only then will Iraqis feel they are the sovereign owners of their own country. The occupation is the elephant in the room. Some Iraqis spend their time fighting it. Others spend their time blaming it. A few Iraqis depend on it, and hide behind it. But it distorts everything. I am not arguing that the occupation must end tomorrow. Withdrawing 150,000 troops with their arms and equipment will take at least six months.

But there has to be an immediate announcement that this is the new US policy. At the same time, while the withdrawal gets underway, there needs to be a national conference to which the widest cross-section of Iraqis is invited. It cannot be confined to the members of the current Iraqi parliament. It must also include Sunni national resistance leaders, thetribal sheikhs of the Awakening movement, and the leaders of the Shia militias. Others who should take part are Iraq's religious leaders, and representatives of civil society, trade unions, and women's groups.

Either separately or as part of the conference US officials and commanders must negotiate directly with the leaders of the armed groups about the scope and pace of the withdrawal, the goal being that it should take place within the framework of a ceasefire, so that US troops can leave without being attacked as they move out towards the sea via Kuwait or Turkey.

In parallel with the national conference, there need to be a series of local conferences in provincial capitals and smaller towns, with the aim of creating unity administrations for running local affairs while reconstruction proceeds.

Who would convene such a national conference? Ideally – the United Nations and the Arab League. While it was underway, they would mobilise a massive financial package to rebuild Iraq. The United States and Britain would be expected to contribute a substantial share, since they have a moral responsibility to repair the damage they have caused.

I do not pretend that these arrangements will be easy to put in place or that they will work smoothly, but I see no other way to resolve the conflict. Iraq's principal neighbours, Iran and Syria, have no incentive to help rebuild Iraq unless they know the United States is definitely leaving. As long as there is doubt, Iran and Syria will be concerned that any aid they give Iraq will be used to perpetuate the occupation. Iraq's regional neighbours have held several rounds of talks but they will never produce any substantive results without a clear announcement by the US that it is leaving Iraq. Ending the occupation is the precondition for regional co-operation.

It is also the precondition for political reconciliation inside Iraq. The best chance for persuading Iraqis to look into the abyss and see they cannot afford to tear their country apart is to make them realise their country's future is in their own hands at last. As long as foreigners take Iraq's decisions for them, there is little chance of progress.