

# what the public really wants on Iraq

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Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki arrives in Washington this week to help President Bush persuade the American people to stay the course in Iraq. Public opinion polls, however, show a solid majority of Americans now believe the Iraq war is a mistake and even more believe Iraq is now engulfed in a civil war that has our troops caught in a costly crossfire. Staying the course has become a less and less attractive option to the American public by the day.

Therefore, public interest is strong and increasing in a plausible plan to leave Iraq. This is the key question about Iraq that divides Americans today, according to an in-depth analysis of public opinion polls conducted by the Center for American Progress and The Century Foundation.

In the coming weeks and months, America's political leaders will be sifting through all of these polls in search of data that supports their positions on Iraq in the run up to congressional elections in November. That's why it's important to examine the questions and answers of many different public opinion polls, as we do below, so that the most solid and robust conclusions about Americans' views on Iraq can be drawn. As shown below, most Americans are well-aware of the deteriorating situation in Iraq and want their political leaders to come up with a plausible plan for leaving.

## **General Views of the Iraq Situation**

A clear majority of the public now believes that the war in Iraq is a mistake and that the costs of the war have not been worth the benefits. Ten polls conducted between March and late June show this quite clearly:

- ❖ In an early June CBS News poll, 62 percent thought the result of the war in Iraq wasn't worth "the loss of American life and other costs of attacking Iraq," compared to 33 percent who thought the result was worth the costs.
- ❖ In an early March Gallup poll, 60 percent said that "all in all" it wasn't worth going to war in Iraq, compared to 37 percent who thought it was worth it.
- ❖ In an early June Ipsos-AP poll, 59 percent thought that "thinking about how things have gone in Iraq since the United States went to war," the U.S. made a mistake going to war in Iraq rather than the right decision (38 percent). A very similar question was

asked by ABC News/Washington Post (ABC/WP) in mid-March and returned a very similar 59 percent to 40 percent split in public opinion.

- ❖ In a late June ABC/WP poll, the public, by a 58 percent-to-40 percent margin, said that “considering the costs versus the benefits to the United States” the war with Iraq was not worth fighting.
- ❖ In a late May Quinnipiac University poll, 56 percent believed that “going to war with Iraq” was the wrong thing to do, compared to 39 percent who thought going to war was correct.
- ❖ In a late June Gallup poll, 55 percent said that “in view of developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq” the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, compared to 43 percent who thought sending troops wasn’t a mistake. A mid-June CNN poll asked the identical question and got an almost-identical 54 percent to 42 percent result.
- ❖ In a late June *Los Angeles Times* (LAT) poll, 54 percent thought “the situation in Iraq” wasn’t worth going to war over, while 41 percent thought it was worth it.
- ❖ In an early June NBC News/Wall Street Journal (NBC/WSJ) poll, 52 percent said “removing Saddam Hussein from power” wasn’t worth “the number of U.S. casualties and the financial cost of the war,” compared to 40 percent who thought Saddam’s ouster justified these costs.

These results indicate that the public has made a judgment on the war in Iraq that is not particularly sensitive to the wording of poll questions: the war is a mistake and not worth its associated costs. As the CBS News poll did in early June, mentioning the loss of American life produced the most negative result (62 percent to 33 percent), while mentioning the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, as the NBC/WSJ poll did in their poll around the same time produced the least negative result (52 percent to 40 percent). But what’s striking is how consistently negative the public is about the war in Iraq when the questions do not refer to specific aspects of the war but rather ask respondents to evaluate the war in very general terms – its overall costs versus benefits, whether “all in all” it was worth it and, of course, whether it was a mistake.

### ***Effects of the Iraq War***

The fundamental rationale for the Iraq war was that it would make the United States safer by removing Saddam Hussein from power so that he could not help terrorists deploy weapons of mass destruction against the United States. And

### **IRAQ AND TERRORISM**

- ❖ **30 percent** said military action against Iraq has made us “more safe from terrorism,” compared to **67 percent** who said it has either made us less safe or made no difference. (CBS)
- ❖ Only **27 percent** believe the war has lessened the chances of “terrorist attacks in the U.S.” while **37 percent** think the chance of an attack has increased and **33 percent** think it has made no difference. (Pew)

on that most fundamental level, the public does not feel the Iraq war has delivered on its promises.

When asked directly about safety from terrorist attacks, only about a third or less typically say the Iraq war has made the country safer. The rest say either it has made us less safe or has had no effect. In an early March CBS poll, for example, 30 percent said military action against Iraq has made us “more safe from terrorism,” compared to 67 percent who said it has either made us less safe (23 percent) or made no difference (44 percent).

Similarly, in a mid-April Pew poll, only 27 percent thought the Iraq war has lessened the chances of “terrorist attacks in the U.S.,” while 37 percent thought the chances of such attacks had increased, and 33 percent thought it had made no difference. And in a May CNN poll, a question about whether the Iraq war “has made the U.S. safer or less safe from terrorism” found that only 33 percent believe the U.S. is safer compared to 53 percent who believe the country is less safe.

People have a more mixed reaction, however, when the specific issues of safety and terrorist attacks are not raised. In the mid-June Pew poll, for example, 44 percent said the Iraq war had helped the war on terrorism, compared to 40 percent who said it had hurt that effort. Similarly, 51 percent of respondents in the late June ABC/WP poll thought the Iraq war had “contributed” to the long-term security of the U.S.

In the same ABC/WP poll, respondents were also asked about the Iraq war’s effects in four other areas: the Iraqi people; democracy in Arab countries; stability in the Middle East; and America’s standing in the world. Only one of those questions drew a positive response – by a 68 percent to 39 percent margin, the respondents thought the war had “helped to improve the lives of the Iraqi people.”

#### THE WAR AND THE MIDDLE EAST

- ❖ **59 percent** believe “prospects for democracy in the Middle East” are worse off due to the war, compared to **37 percent** who believe they are better off. (Gallup)
- ❖ Only **39 percent** believe the war contributed to long-term peace and stability in the region, compared to **59 percent** who think it has not. (ABC/WP)
- ❖ **68 percent** believe the war has helped improve the lives of Iraqis, versus **39 percent** who believe it hasn’t. (ABC/WP)

Respondents were split on whether the war has “encouraged democracy in other Arab nations,” with 49 percent believing that to be the case compared to 47 percent who did not. By a 58 percent to 39 percent margin, respondents said the war has not “contributed to long-term peace and stability in the Middle East.” And by an overwhelming 74 percent to 25 percent margin, they felt that the war has “damaged the United States’ image in the rest of the world.”

An early June Gallup poll discovered even less enthusiasm. The poll asked about six things related to the Iraq war and whether they were better off, worse off, or the same as a result of the war. In none of these cases did a majority

believe that “better off” was the correct characterization. The one that came closest was the Iraqi people, where 48 percent thought they were better off, compared to 47 percent who thought they were the same or worse off. This was followed by “the strength and

preparedness of the U.S. military” (42 percent better off/54 percent the same or worse off); the war on terrorism (40/58); “the prospects for democracy in the Middle East” (37/59); the people of the United States (26/73); and “the image of the U.S. around the world” (11/86).

### *How’s it Going and Where’s it Going?*

Not surprisingly, the public tends to characterize the Iraq situation as going badly for the U.S. In the early June Gallup poll, for example, 53 percent thought things were going moderately or very badly “for the U.S. in Iraq,” compared to 47 percent who thought things were going moderately or very well. The identical question was asked by CNN in mid-June, but this time 55 percent thought the war was going badly compared to 41 percent who believed it was going moderately well or very well. The early June poll by CBS discovered essentially the same breakdown, with 55 percent saying that things were going somewhat or very badly “for the U.S. in its efforts to bring stability and order to Iraq,” to 43 percent who thought the effort was going somewhat or very well.

Nor does the public believe we are currently winning the war in Iraq. In the early June CBS poll, 55 percent said “neither side” is winning the war, 34 percent the U.S. was winning, and 9 percent said “the Iraqi resistance and insurgents” were winning. Gallup asked a very similar question back in early February, and found an identical 55 percent saying neither side was winning, compared to 31 percent who thought the U.S. was winning and 10 percent who thought the Iraqi insurgents were succeeding.

The public also overwhelmingly believes that the Iraqi situation now qualifies as a civil war. In the same June CBS poll, 82 percent agreed that “there is a civil war going on in Iraq among different groups of Iraqis right now.” Only 12 percent disagreed. Not surprisingly, then, the American public also lacks confidence that a good outcome from the war is likely. In the early June Gallup poll, for example, only 19 percent thought the U.S. would “definitely” win the war, alongside another 29 percent who thought the U.S. would “probably” win the war in Iraq. In contrast, 21 percent of the respondents believe the U.S. can win the war but won’t; another 27 percent believe the U.S. simply can’t win.

A mid-April Pew poll also found a split decision, 43 percent to 41 percent, between those saying Iraq will turn out to be another Vietnam and those saying the U.S. “will accomplish its goals.” And, while the early June NBC/WSJ poll found that the public thought it likely (by a 54 percent to 45 percent margin) that “America’s involvement in Iraq would eventually be successful,” an early March Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) poll discovered that, based on a 10 point scale, just 28 percent expressed confidence that “the US

#### PROSPECTS FOR VICTORY

- ❖ **55 percent** believe “neither side” is winning the war, compared to 34 percent who believe the U.S. is winning and **9 percent** who believe the insurgency is winning. (CBS)
- ❖ Just **19 percent** believe the U.S. will definitely win the war, while **21 percent** believe the U.S. ‘can win’ but won’t and **27 percent** believe the U.S. can’t win under any circumstances. (Gallup)
- ❖ By **55 percent** to **40 percent**, the public believes Iraq is more likely to evolve into chaos and civil war than to produce a stable government for the Iraqi people. (Gallup)

intervention in Iraq will succeed.” Another 13 percent of respondents in the PIPA poll were uncertain and 58 percent lacked confidence in that outcome.

In addition, a early March Gallup poll found that 55 percent of the public believe the Iraq situation was more likely to evolve into “chaos and civil war” than to produce a stable government for the Iraqi people; 44 percent believe the opposite.

Most questions about Iraq’s future, however, tend to focus specifically on the likelihood that Iraq will attain “stable democratic government” without mentioning winning the war or alternative scenarios like chaos or a Vietnam-style quagmire. Responses to these questions vary from somewhat positive to somewhat negative, with significant sensitivity to the wording of and the time frame used for the questions.

On the more positive side, the early June CBS poll found that 54 percent believe will Iraq will eventually become a stable democracy, either in the next year or two (4 percent) or longer (50 percent). Another 43 percent say Iraq will never attain that goal. The mid-June Pew poll also found that 55 percent of the public believe that “regardless of what you think about the original decision to use military force in Iraq” the U.S. will definitely or probably succeed “in establishing a stable democratic government in Iraq.” This compares with the 38 percent who thought the U.S. would definitely or probably fail.

#### LITTLE FAITH IN LEADERSHIP ON IRAQ

- ❖ **57 percent** believe Congress should pass a resolution outlining a plan for withdrawal, versus **39 percent** who believe decisions about withdrawal should be left to the White House. (Gallup)
- ❖ Just **31 percent** believe Bush has a plan for withdrawal, while only **25 percent** believe Congressional Democrats have one. (Gallup)

On the mixed to negative side, a Gallup poll in early January found a dead-even 46/46 percent split when the question was phrased as whether “eventually, there will be a stable democratic government in Iraq that can maintain order without assistance from U.S. troops.” And the most negative responses are obtained by unadorned queries about whether a stable, democratic government will be established in Iraq — without reference to time frames, the original decision to invade Iraq, or the assistance of U.S. troops. In the early June AP poll, 54 percent said a stable democratic government was not likely and 44 percent said it was likely. A Gallup poll from early December of last year returned a similar 55 percent to 41 percent result.

### What Is to Be Done?

Given that the public believes the war in Iraq is a mistake, isn't worth the costs, is going badly in a country embroiled in civil war, and lacks confidence that the American effort will ultimately prove successful, it would be strange indeed if there wasn't considerable interest in bringing the conflict to an end and getting U.S. troops home. And there is.

Start with the clear and unambiguous public support for troop reduction. Here are the most recent readings:

- ❖ In the March PIPA poll, 68 percent wanted U.S. troops either withdrawn (26 percent) or decreased (42 percent)
- ❖ In an early April Gallup poll, 64 percent wanted to withdraw some (36 percent) or all (28 percent) of U.S. troops in Iraq
- ❖ In both the April CBS and May Quinnipiac polls, 57 percent wanted to decrease or remove all U.S. troops
- ❖ In the early June NBC/WSJ poll, 57 percent thought we should reduce our troops “now that Iraq has adapted a constitution,” rather than maintain the current troop levels “to help secure peace and stability”
- ❖ In the May ABC/WP poll, 54 percent wanted “US military forces” decreased

Another indicator of the public’s leanings is provided by responses to a pair of questions asked by Gallup last December on how long people thought the U.S. *would* have “a significant number of troops in Iraq” and how long the U.S. *should* have significant numbers of troops there. In the *would* question, just 17 percent put that period as under a year, while 82 percent thought it would be either 1 to 3 years (53 percent) or longer than 3 years (29 percent). In the *should* question, 59 percent believed the significant troop presence period should be less than a year, compared to 38 percent who thought it should be 1 to 3 years (29 percent) or more (9 percent).

A Pew question from early March suggests the same sentiment. Sixty-one percent said they were more concerned about the U.S. waiting “too long to withdraw its troops from Iraq” than they were about the U.S. leaving Iraq “before a stable democracy is in place” (30 percent).

But how is a troop withdrawal to be effected? For that you presumably need a plan, and indeed, the public says it would like to see one. In a late June Gallup poll, 57 percent said that “Congress should pass a resolution that outlines a plan for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.” Only 39 percent said that “decisions about withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq should be left to the president and his advisors.”

Right now, however, the overwhelming majority of Americans do not believe any political quarter offers a clear plan for withdrawal from Iraq. In the late June Gallup poll, only 31 percent thought President Bush had such a plan and just 25 percent thought the Democrats in Congress had a plan. Similarly, in the June WP/ABC poll, 35 percent believed the Bush administration had a plan to deal with the war in Iraq and a mere 24 percent thought Democrats in Congress had a clear plan.

What does the public want such a plan to look like if someone actually got around to providing one? Here we have some guidance from an interesting late June Gallup poll, which simply asked the open-ended question: “What do you think the United States should do next in regard to Iraq?” The poll then grouped the responses into broad categories that fell pretty neatly into three categories: immediate withdrawal (31 percent); gradual withdrawal, including “train Iraqis to run their own country” and “come up with an exit strategy” (31 percent); and “stay the course” (30 percent).

These poll results confirm that a majority of the American public would like to see a plan for withdrawal, though immediate withdrawal is still a minority position. A logical way of responding to these public preferences would be to provide a timetable for withdrawal that would be done gradually to accommodate the large bloc that is leery of immediate withdrawal, but that still seems definite. Indeed, a plan for withdrawal that lacks a timetable is hard to distinguish from an open-ended commitment to troop presence in Iraq and, hence, from staying the course.

### ***Views on a Timetable for Withdrawal***

When asked in the most general terms, a majority of Americans support a timetable, though it falls short of the pro-withdrawal numbers cited above. In the May CBS poll, the public by a 60 percent-to-36 percent margin endorsed setting “a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.” The mid-June CNN poll found a 53 percent-to-41 percent majority agreeing with the statement, “The U.S. should set a timetable for withdrawal by announcing it will remove all of its troops from Iraq by a certain date.”

Pew’s mid-June poll recorded a similar 52 percent to 42 percent majority in favor of “a timetable for when troops will be withdrawn from Iraq.” But once specific timetables for withdrawal are mentioned, or arguments and counterarguments offered, the picture becomes considerably murkier. A late June Gallup poll, for example, gave respondents four specific options:

“Here are four different plans the U.S. could follow in dealing with the war in Iraq. Which ONE do you prefer? Withdraw all troops from Iraq immediately. Withdraw all troops by June 2007, that is, in 12 months' time. Withdraw troops, but take as many years to do this as are needed to turn control over to the Iraqis. OR, Send more troops to Iraq.”

The results revealed that 50 percent of the respondents favored either immediate withdrawal (17 percent) or the June 2007 target date (33 percent). Another 49 percent favored either the no-timetable eventual withdrawal option (41 percent) or sending in more troops (8 percent).

Democracy Corps gave respondents two specific choices in their May poll and got a very similar split. Fifty percent thought “The U.S. should bring home all U.S. troops within a year to force Iraqis to take control of their country,” while 49 percent believed “the U.S. should

#### **SUPPORT FOR A TIMETABLE FOR WITHDRAWAL DECLINES WHEN SPECIFICS ARE OFFERED**

- ❖ **60 percent** of the public endorse setting an unspecified timetable for withdrawal, compared to **36 percent** who do not. (CBS)
- ❖ When options are specified, **17 percent** favor immediate withdrawal, while **33 percent** want withdrawal within a year, compared to **41 percent** who endorse withdrawal with no timetable. (Gallup)
- ❖ **50 percent** believe all troops should be withdrawn within a year to force Iraqis to create a stable government, while **49 percent** believe the U.S. shouldn’t pull out until the Iraqis can handle their own security. (Democracy Corps)


not withdraw its troops from Iraq until Iraqi security forces are able to provide security for their own citizens.”

Questions that ask whether U.S. troops should leave Iraq “as soon as possible” or instead remain until there’s “stability” in Iraq, as the June Pew poll did, or until there’s “a stable democracy” in Iraq, as the June CBS poll did, generate a similarly mixed response, shading negative toward leaving. The June Pew poll found 50 percent in favor of remaining until stability has been attained, compared to 45 percent in favor of leaving as soon as possible. The June CBS poll discovered a similar 48 percent to 46 percent split slightly in favor of staying in Iraq until a stable democracy has been attained. The June WP/ABC poll also found a 47 percent to 51 percent split between those who thought we should set a deadline for withdrawal “in order to avoid future casualties” and those who said a deadline “would only encourage anti-government insurgents.”

Putting all these data together (on troop withdrawal, plans and timetables) suggests the following: It is difficult to have a plan for Iraq that sounds much like a plan without a timetable. Hence, the very low number of respondents in these polls who are now convinced that a clear plan for Iraq has been offered.

However, while a plan might need a timetable, a timetable, by itself, does not strike the public as much of a plan. Hence, the split decisions we see when the public is pressed about specifics of a timetable and exposed to counterarguments. There are serious questions and concerns left unaddressed by the simple concept of a timetable and those come out when respondents are pushed.

Therefore, the public will probably not embrace a timetable until it is embedded in a plan that they otherwise understand and support. Along these lines, data from a mid-April poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for MoveOn indicate that embedding a timetable in a plausible overall plan for Iraq may generate higher support among Americans. In that poll, conducted in swing Congressional districts, respondents were offered the following plan-with-timetable (fairly close to the “[Strategic Redeployment](#)” plan advocated by the Center for American Progress and others): “Gradually withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq, with all troops out by the end of 2007. Most U.S. troops would come home, but some would be sent to Afghanistan and other areas that pose threats to Americans.”

That description generated a margin of support 11 points higher than simply alluding to a timetable for exiting Iraq. While more research is clearly needed, it begins to suggest the conditions under which support for a timetable could become a stronger and more robust public preference. What the public is looking for is a plan for leaving Iraq that makes sense in the broader context of the war on terror and the quest to make Americans safer. Provide that and support for bringing the Iraq conflict to a definite end is likely to ngthen.