

Britain: Iraq Commission rules out setting date for troop withdrawal

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On July 14, the Iraq Commission released its conclusions “on the scope and focus of Britain’s future involvement in Iraq”.

Set up by the Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) think-tank in partnership with the television broadcaster Channel 4, the Iraq Commission declared itself the “British equivalent of the US Iraq Study Group” headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic Congressmen Lee Hamilton.

As with the Baker-Hamilton report, the Iraq Commission styled itself as an “independent, cross-party Commission”, with its chairmanship jointly shared between former Liberal Democrat leader Lord Ashdown, Labour’s Baroness Jay and the Conservative Party’s Lord King. The commission—whose hearings were televised this month on Channel 4—interviewed more than 50 people including Lt-Gen Jay Garner, former US administrator in Iraq, General Sir Mike Jackson, former head of the British Army, and Sir Jeremy Greenstock, Britain’s former United Nations ambassador.

And like the Baker/Hamilton group, the Iraq Commission has been positioned by sections of the ruling elite and the media to serve as a vehicle for a tactical shift in Britain’s policy in Iraq, whilst in no way undermining either the original pretext for the invasion of Iraq nor the policy of pre-emptive war.

Its recommendations largely follow those of the Baker-Hamilton report—particularly on the need for a diplomatic offensive to engage the United Nations, the European Union and Iraq’s neighbours to help extract the US-led occupation from the quagmire it has created. But the fact that the Bush administration has rejected such calls, and instead beefed up the US occupation, casts an even longer shadow over the British Commission’s pretence of an independent strategy than it did over Baker-Hamilton.

The political character of the Iraq Commission’s report is made clear by its remit, which states that issues “expressly outside” its scope include “The merits and legality of the UK decision to intervene militarily in Iraq” and the “specific allegations of war crimes by British Forces, or corruption or wrong doing by individual organizations”.

Its claim to represent all strands of opinion on the Iraq invasion is further undermined by its argument that “much has been achieved by the coalition in ending the regime of a brutal dictator and the holding of elections.”

This assertion flies in the face of the evidence assembled by the commission itself. Its self-imposed limitations cannot disguise the

social and political catastrophe that has been visited on the Iraqi people by US and British imperialism. The report cites the comment of Simon Maxwell of the Overseas Development Institute: “One of the remarkable things about Iraq... is that it has gone from being a middle income country to something that looks like a failed state, in an extraordinary short space of time.”

Dir Heba al-Naseri from the UK Iraqi Medical Association adds: “Back in the eighties life expectancy in Iraq was a bit better than the rest of the region, and similar to what it was in Europe. Now the life expectancy is on a par with sub Saharan Africa. Men don’t live to more than 49.5 years (on average).”

Elsewhere the report states, “The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Iraq is vast. The UN estimates around 100 people are killed every day. Two out of five adults are traumatized. One in three is in need of humanitarian assistance. One in six Iraqis has been displaced. Up to 50 percent of the working population is unemployed. 54 percent live on less than a dollar a day. Many schools have closed, and thousands of doctors, teachers and other professionals have been murdered or have fled the country.”

In addition to inadequate energy supplies, the commission reports that “violence, corruption, poor infrastructure and the lack of qualified professionals means that health provision in large parts of Iraq remains poor and supply chains for the provisions of medical supplies are sporadic and dysfunctional.”

It continues, “Despite the large sums of international money involved, large scale reconstruction projects have been hampered, not only by the insurgency, but also by corruption and poor construction and maintenance.”

In the section dealing with the destabilizing consequences for the Middle East region of the Iraq war and subsequent occupation, it explains that the massive movement of refugees fleeing Iraq, particularly to Syria (where an estimated one million have taken refuge) has been described by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres as the “biggest movement [of displaced people] in the Middle East since the 1948 Palestinian crisis.”

The report also acknowledges the domestic impact of the political turmoil created by the invasion, in a guarded reference to the increased terror threat in Britain, stating that “the war in Iraq has undoubtedly been used as a recruiting tool which has contributed towards the radicalization of some individual Muslims in the UK.”

This account of the human suffering and political chaos created

by the US-led invasion throws into stark relief the mendacity of the commission's own recommendations.

Throughout the media, the commission has been presented as an expression of the pressure for Prime Minister Gordon Brown to set out a significant departure from foreign policy under Tony Blair. *The Independent's* deputy political editor, Colin Brown, trailed its findings under the heading, "Pull troops out now and stand up to Bush, inquiry tells Brown."

The report says nothing of the sort.

For the commission, the problem with the invasion is not so much the human tragedy it has created, but that "it is now clear that the initial, over ambitious vision of the coalition can no longer be achieved in Iraq."

For this reason it calls on the UK government to "redefine its objectives". Its aims should be to "Preserve and underpin the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state", "Support a strongly federal internal structure for the Iraqi state" and to "Promote the constructive engagement of Iraq's neighbours in the achievement of the above aims".

It also proposes a new roadmap for Iraq, "with a strong emphasis on the liberalization of the Iraqi economy"—meaning the privatization of its oil reserves—despite the fact that the report states elsewhere that this strategy is promoting the break-up of Iraq. The Kurdish controlled areas are proceeding "to negotiate exploration contracts with international oil companies... much to the consternation of Baghdad," it states.

An air of nervousness permeates the report. Even what passes for its most forthright statement of differences with the Bush administration is made in the politest of tones. It notes that "these recommendations are in some cases at variance with positions hitherto taken by the US Administration. Nonetheless, we believe that the British Government should make clear both privately to the US and publicly that it believes that this course of action both reflects British and wider interests and is the most likely to reduce the violence and offer Iraqis a more stable future."

But the report is forced to acknowledge the political reality that any shift in UK strategy can and must only take place with the agreement of America and that the necessity to maintain Britain's strategic alliance with the US is of over-riding importance. Again and again it stresses that "No programme for the future of Iraq in the short term can succeed without the active support and involvement of the United States."

Such statements express the hope that within the US political elite there are those ready to scale down the occupation and carry out the type of changes first advanced by Baker-Hamilton that the commission also favours, including the Democrats and disaffected Republicans.

The report notes that public support for the Bush administration has collapsed, and that "Iraq will be a major, if not the overriding issue in the primaries and subsequent [Presidential] election." But in placing its hopes on a course change agreed by the US, the Commission only ends up as a pale echo of the unprincipled opposition across the Atlantic.

Notwithstanding the dangers involved, the commission's recommendations make perfectly clear that the overriding concern of Britain's political and military elite, like its US counterpart, is

that there can be no "solution" to the Iraq quagmire that in anyway suggests a defeat for the Anglo-American alliance. This would not only weaken US and British imperialism in the struggle to dominate vital global resources and markets, but would risk fueling mass anti-war sentiment that represents a grave political threat to all the official political parties, whether in government or opposition.

It is for this reason that, despite *The Independent's* claims to the contrary, the report states explicitly that "A date or timetable for drawdown should not be set."

"An immediate withdrawal would ... go against the wishes of the Iraqi government and damage relations with the US," it states. "If the UK is committed to a genuine political and international process for Iraq, 'cutting and running' would undermine that commitment as well as our credibility and chances for success."

Whilst it continues that such concerns are not, in and of themselves, grounds for maintaining the occupation, it insists that the alternative scenario of a staged rundown of UK forces is not viable. The UK's commitment is already at a minimum and "any further piecemeal reductions would mean that the force would have no real operational capability at all and progressively would be unable to sustain itself."

All that is left to the commission is to recommend what it describes as a "progressive cessation of offensive operations," which concentrates on training Iraq's own security forces whereby "during the transition period UK forces should only conduct offensive operations in self-defence or at the specific request of the Iraqi authorities so as to assist in the maintenance of order."

The proposal reflects little more than frustration and despair. Given that elsewhere the report acknowledges the scale of the opposition to the occupation—stating that in the south-eastern area of Iraq, the main focus of violence is directed against the British-led Multinational Force, and that the Iraqi state imposed by the West lacks "both power and legitimacy"—it is hard to see how offensive operations could be scaled down, let alone "ceased". Indeed, the commission warns ominously, "There are no easy options left in Iraq, only painful ones."

Having ruled out any examination of the causes of the Iraq crisis in order to avoid questions of responsibility and accountability, the commission's findings are a political apologia for maintaining the occupation albeit by different means.



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