

# AlterNet

VOTER GUIDES



## Progressive Voter Guide to Iraq and Beyond

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The current financial crisis, which experts are roundly describing as a calamity of unprecedented proportions, has convinced most voters that the economy is the most urgent priority of the incoming administration. The war on Iraq -- and the broader existential conflict known for years now as the Global War on Terror -- has taken a backseat in many voters' minds. But the two are inextricably linked, and how the next president views the latter will largely dictate the way the government spends taxpayer dollars in the years to come.

"The Iraq adventure has seriously weakened the U.S. economy," wrote economists Linda J. Bilmes and Joseph E. Stiglitz in the *Washington Post* on the fifth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion. "... You can't spend \$3 trillion -- yes, \$3 trillion -- on a failed war abroad and not feel the pain at home." Regardless of the timetable, at this point, "the United States will be paying the price of Iraq for decades to come."

And then, of course, there's Afghanistan. In spite of their differences on when and how to leave Iraq, both John McCain and Barack Obama support an escalation of the war in Afghanistan, a conflict that, if history is any indication, is unwinnable.

Unlike reports from think tanks or political candidates, the recommendations below are not about trying to find military solutions to the wars we have created in Iraq and Afghanistan. They do not seek to weigh in on what Iraqis should do to address the internal strife in their country (or how to spend the billions of dollars of oil revenues that U.S. politicians like to say should be used on reconstruction.) The recommendations in this guide rest on a belief that Iraqi sovereignty and self-determination -- as well as the well-being of American troops -- rely foremost on an end to the U.S. occupation. And they encourage the rethinking of American military power, particularly the so-called War on Terror, which, from its inception, has sought to legitimize a bankrupt foreign policy based on pre-emptive war. The results have been disastrous for everyone.

## 1. ENDING THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ

The Iraq War, waged illegally and based on lies, is in its sixth year. Up to 1 million Iraqis have died. Some 4,200 U.S. troops have been killed. Even as media and political rhetoric continue to celebrate the success of the “surge,” the ugly truth is that the recent decrease in violence is due to factors -- such as brutally effective ethnic cleansing -- that have little to do with the 30,000 troops redeployed to Iraq in the winter of 2007. The presence of American troops has not created the political conditions necessary for Iraq to be a sovereign country. Instead, it undermines Iraqis’ right to self-determination and serves as a recruiting tool for those who wish harm upon the United States.

**Solution:** End the occupation swiftly and completely.

**Obama’s position:** An early opponent to the invasion of Iraq, Barack Obama has nevertheless voted to fund the war since reaching the Senate. His current plan seeks a phased withdrawal that would last until 2010 -- although he has said he will revise his strategy depending on the facts on the ground. Beyond 2010, Obama says he will leave a “residual force” in place “to conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions against al Qaeda in Iraq and to protect American diplomatic and civilian personnel.” He also intends to retain control of Baghdad International Airport and the Green Zone, and keep the U.S. embassy in place.

**McCain’s position:** McCain famously declared that the United States will remain in Iraq until “victory” is achieved -- even if it takes another 100 years. He has long refused to name target dates for troop withdrawals, claiming that it would be tantamount to giving terrorists a timeline for defeat. More recently on the campaign trail, however, he has claimed Iraq can be “won” by 2013. Still, he has said he reserves the right to reassess the situation upon taking office.

**Learn more:** Barack Obama and Joe Biden: War in Iraq<sup>1</sup>, McCain/Palin: Strategy for Victory in Iraq<sup>2</sup>, Center for American Progress: How to Redeploy<sup>3</sup>

## 2. MERCENARIES

The use of private military contractors, or mercenaries, has exploded during the war in Iraq, and the consequences -- human, financial and political -- have been devastating. There are 190,000 private contractors in Iraq and neighboring countries -- outnumbering the U.S. military -- and according to one recent report<sup>4</sup>, they will cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$100 billion by the end of 2008. Companies like Blackwater, DynCorp and KBR have made billions off the war in Iraq, and their presence has proven deadly to Iraqi civilians, as so lethally demonstrated by Blackwater’s Nisour Square massacre on Sept. 16, 2007 -- a crime for which no one has been held accountable.

1 <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/iraq/>

2 <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/FDEB03A7-30B0-4ECE-8E34-4C7EA83F11D8.htm>

3 [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/08/how\\_to\\_redeploy.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/08/how_to_redeploy.html)

4 [http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/97834/one\\_fifth\\_of\\_iraq\\_funding\\_goes\\_to\\_private\\_contractors/](http://www.alternet.org/waroniraq/97834/one_fifth_of_iraq_funding_goes_to_private_contractors/)

**Solution:** Ban mercenaries.

**Obama's position:** Despite the fact that Obama was one of the earliest members of Congress to scrutinize the issue of private contractors, sponsoring legislation in the Senate that sought to hold contractors accountable for their actions in Iraq, as a candidate for president, he says he will “not rule out” using mercenaries like Blackwater. Indeed, given his Iraq plan, Obama may have to do so. Some Congressional Democrats have called for a ban on Blackwater specifically, given its criminal actions in Iraq. Rep. Henry Waxman of California recently said he will call on Obama to do so. But Obama, who was guarded by Blackwater on his recent trip to the Middle East and who said that the company has gotten a “bad rap,” has not signed on to the Stop Outsourcing Security (SOS) Act, brought forth by Reps. Jan Schakowski, D-Ill., Bob Filner, D-Calif., and others, which would phase out the use of mercenaries.

**McCain's position:** McCain has blamed the need for mercenaries in Iraq on the failure of the Bush administration to send enough troops. Although he has said little about Blackwater or private military contractors specifically, lobbyist and war profiteer Charlie Black was McCain's chief political adviser at a time when his firm represented some of the biggest names in war contracting -- and his lobbying firm signed Blackwater as a client in late 2007. McCain, who also has been guarded by mercenaries on his trips to the region and has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from defense contractors, has voted repeatedly against holding them accountable. In 2005, he voted against an amendment that would establish a committee to investigate waste, fraud and abuse in the awarding of contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also voted to table an amendment that would make several changes to federal contracting and procurement laws and call for the suspension and debarment of unethical contractors, disclosure of audit reports by the head of each executive agency outlining unjustified contractor costs, and the publication of information regarding federal contractor penalties and violations.

**Learn more:** Congressional Budget Office: “Contractors' Support of U.S. Operations in Iraq” (August 2008)<sup>5</sup>, Private Military Contractors in Iraq: An Examination of Blackwater's Actions in Fallujah (September 2007)<sup>6</sup>, International Peace Institute<sup>7</sup>

### 3. AFGHANISTAN

The invasion of Afghanistan was as illegal as the invasion of Iraq. Now in its eighth year, it is still stubbornly considered the “Right War” by many Americans and by Democrats who are embracing it as the front line of the so-called “War on Terror.” Meanwhile, violence is escalating; U.S.-NATO airstrikes have left hundreds of civilians dead. With no apparent end in sight, the mission in Afghanistan, were it even viable, would take decades to complete. As former U.N. ambassador Richard Holbrooke wrote in the *Washington Post*, “The conflict in Afghanistan will be far more costly and much, much longer

5 <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=9688&type=1>

6 <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20070927104643.pdf>

7 <http://www.ipacademy.org/>

than Americans realize," and it "will eventually become the longest in American history, surpassing even Vietnam." Perhaps more significantly, the ongoing American presence in Afghanistan, like its occupation of Iraq, serves as a recruitment tool for those terrorist groups the United States claims it is stamping out in the region.

**Solution:** Withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan as quickly as possible.

**Obama's position:** In his calls for an end to the Iraq War, Obama has repeatedly said that, in waging war against Saddam Hussein, the U.S. "dropped the ball" on the mission of combating terrorism after 9/11. "I think one of the biggest mistakes we've made strategically after 9/11 was to fail to finish the job (in Afghanistan)," he said this summer during his visit to Kabul. "We got distracted by Iraq." Obama has vowed to redeploy soldiers to Afghanistan, saying he would send up to 10,000 additional troops. "We need more troops, more helicopters, better intelligence-gathering and more nonmilitary assistance to accomplish the mission there," he wrote in his New York Times op-ed piece titled "My Plan for Iraq." Congressional Democrats have rallied around his position -- and President Bush has adopted it, something Obama has taken credit for on the campaign trail.

**McCain's position:** McCain has been widely criticized for his apparent lack of concern for the war in Afghanistan, most recently after the distribution of video footage in which he was shown telling the Council on Foreign Relations in 2003 that the United States could "muddle through in Afghanistan." After a long period of insisting that NATO troops should bear the brunt of the mission in Afghanistan, McCain has adopted Obama's position on Afghanistan in time for the election, vowing this summer to send "at least three additional brigades" to the country.

**Learn more:** International Crisis Group: Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>, Huffington Post: Three Independent Reports Conclude Efforts in Afghanistan are Failing and Call for Urgent Action<sup>9</sup>

## 4. IRAQ'S REFUGEE CRISIS

The 2002 population of Iraq was 24 million. Since then, 1 out of every 6 Iraqis has lost his or her home, with 1 million or so displaced before 2003. With hundreds of thousands of Iraqis having fled the country since the U.S.-led invasion, the refugee crisis in Iraq has reached epic proportions. Some 5 million Iraqis have been internally displaced from their homes. The Iraqi Red Crescent Society estimates that more than 83 percent of those displaced inside Iraq are women and children, and the majority of the children are under 12. As of the end of 2007, there were about 2.3 million Iraqi refugees living outside the country, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. As European countries start to close their borders to Iraqi refugees, the United States has been downright miserly in its unwillingness to accept Iraqi refugees. As recently reported in the Christian Science Monitor, "The U.S. admitted just over 1,600 Iraqis in fiscal year 2007, far short of its initial 7,000 target, which the State Department attributes to administrative bottlenecks." Sweden, meanwhile, whose population

8 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1266>

9 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/max-bergmann/three-independent-reports\\_b\\_84254.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/max-bergmann/three-independent-reports_b_84254.html)

numbers merely 9 million and who had no role in the Iraq War, has taken in more Iraqi refugees than any other Western country. Meanwhile, according to at least one report, "Iraq's internally displaced population -- not Al Qaeda in Iraq or Iranian influence -- is the primary threat to the country's future stability."

**Solution:** Provide funding for reconstruction, humanitarian aid and resources for Iraqis displaced internally as well as abroad. Allow more Iraqi refugees to enter the United States.

**Obama's position:** Obama has expressed concern for internally displaced Iraqis, and he signed on to 2007 legislation titled the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, which was introduced by Sen. Edward Kennedy as an amendment to the Defense Reauthorization bill. Its provisions included requiring the State Department to provide a comprehensive plan for assisting countries in the region -- especially Iraq, Jordan and Syria -- that are struggling to meet the needs of millions of displaced Iraqis; providing up to 5,000 special immigrant visas (SIVs) a year for Iraqis who worked with the United States, and "protection or immediate removal from Iraq of SIV applicants who are in imminent danger." It also calls for "allowing Iraqis who belong to a community facing persecution or at risk for having worked with a U.S. government agency, contractor, media organization or NGO to petition for resettlement in the U.S."

**McCain's position:** McCain has been virtually silent on the issue of Iraqi refugees. Given his rhetoric on the region, he is unlikely to support assisting countries like Syria in dealing with their refugee population.

**Learn more:** Center for American Progress: "The United States Can Do More for Iraqi Refugees"<sup>10</sup>, Refugees International: Uprooted and Unstable: Meeting Urgent Humanitarian Needs in Iraq<sup>11</sup>, Iraqi Refugee Stories<sup>12</sup>

## 5. VETERANS' HEALTH

A recent report from the RAND Corporation revealed that nearly a fifth of military service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or major depression. Suicide attempts among American veterans have reached catastrophic levels, with one widely reported estimate by the Department of Veterans' Affairs determining that 1,000 vets try to kill themselves every month; about half of those attempts end in death. The VA's attempts to conceal this and other alarming statistics -- as well as its attempt to reduce the number of diagnoses of PTSD, revealed by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and VoteVets.org -- has sparked outrage at a time when the VA is already embroiled in a scandal over its systematic blocking of veterans benefits. In 2004 alone, the last year for which data are available, 6 million veterans and their families had no health care. With American soldiers serving multiple tours of duty to maintain troop levels in Iraq -- and with thousands now scheduled to be shipped to Afghanistan -- the problem will likely only get worse.

10 [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/04/refugees\\_more.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/04/refugees_more.html)

11 <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/issue/detail/10570>

12 <http://www.iraqirefugeestories.org/index.html>

**Solution:** Provide veterans with full health benefits and resources to help them get their lives back on track.

**Obama's position:** As a member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Obama passed legislation to improve care for wounded veterans and helped to pass laws designed to help homeless veterans. As reported by TalkLeft, Obama led a "bipartisan effort to halt the military's unfair practice of discharging service members for having a service-connected psychological injury." He also supported the Webb GI Bill, which was critical to providing educational opportunities for veterans. Obama has an 80 percent approval rating from the Disabled Veterans of America and has received a B+ rating from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

**McCain's position:** John McCain voted against health care funding for veterans in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007. The Disabled Veterans of America gave McCain a 20 percent approval rating, and he has a "D" rating from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. A rundown of some of McCain's specific votes is revealing: In September 2007, McCain voted against the Webb amendment, which called for adequate troop rest between deployments. In 2006, McCain was one of only 13 senators to vote against \$430,000,000 for the Department of Veteran Affairs for medical services for outpatient care and treatment for veterans. McCain joined President Bush in opposing the Webb GI Bill because he felt it would hurt retention by offering veterans an opportunity to go to college. (He then reversed his position and tried to take credit for the bill.)

**Learn more:** Vietnam Veterans of America: PTSD<sup>13</sup>, Iraq Veterans Against the War: Health Fact Sheets<sup>14</sup>, Veterans for Peace<sup>15</sup>

## 6. IRAQI PRISONERS

Since the invasion of Iraq, the United States has arrested thousands of "suspected terrorists," only to hold them without charge. As early as 2004, it was clear that a majority had no terror ties, with the American Red Cross estimating as many as 70 to 90 percent of "detainees" were "arrested by mistake." The current number of Iraqi prisoners being held by the U.S. military is 21,000, some 350 of whom are children. Charges of abuse have continued, long after the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib. More recently, the U.S. military has reportedly transferred more than 200 prisoners to intelligence agencies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries in the past two years, in a covert process similar to the CIA's "extraordinary rendition" program.

**Solution:** Try -- or release -- Iraqi prisoners.

**Obama's position:** Though Obama has put forth no formal plan to address the problem of Iraqis being held without charge in Iraq, he has shown support for the rights of prisoners in

13 <http://www.vva.org/veteran/1007/ptsd.html>

14 <http://ivaw.org/vetresources#health>

15 <http://www.veteransforpeace.org/>

the so-called War on Terror, as displayed by his applauding of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Boumediene v. Bush*, which granted habeas corpus rights to prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

**McCain's position:** McCain called the decision in *Boumediene* "one of the worst decisions in the history of this country," echoing President Bush's line that it would provide special rights for terrorists. He has not addressed the problem of Iraqi prisoners.

**Learn more:** "America's Iraqi Prisoners," the *New Statesman*, August 8, 2008<sup>16</sup>, "The 'Surge' of Iraqi Prisoners" May 7, 2008<sup>17</sup>

## 7. IRAQ'S DESTRUCTION

Although no amount of financial compensation could make up for the deaths and suffering of Iraqis during the war and occupation, the United States should provide the country with the resources to make up for some of the damage it has wrought. Part of this should take the form of reparations for the people of Iraq, whose lives have been so profoundly hijacked and irredeemably altered.

**Solution:** Although no amount of financial compensation could make up for the deaths and suffering of Iraqis during the war and occupation, the United States should provide the country with the resources to make up for some of the damage it has wrought. Part of this should take the form of reparations for the people of Iraq, whose lives have been so profoundly hijacked and irredeemably altered.

**Obama's position:** Obama has no record on the question of reparations for Iraqis, but he has shown concern for Iraq's refugees, as discussed above.

**McCain's position:** McCain has said he opposes providing reparations to the Iraqi people. "I will not support reparations," he said at a town hall meeting in November 2007. "I think the American people have already invested enough in American blood and treasure."

**Learn more:** Electronic Iraq: Direct Aid Initiative<sup>18</sup>, Amnesty International: Iraq<sup>19</sup>, Iraq Veterans Against the War<sup>20</sup>, Reproductive Health Response in Conflict (RHRC) Consortium<sup>21</sup>

## 8. THE POWER TO DECLARE WAR

The war in Iraq is only the latest military conflict that has been waged illegally and without Congressional approval, despite provisions in the U.S. Constitution and on American law books that define the use of military force as requiring congressional approval. Passed in 1973, the War Powers Resolu-

16 <http://www.newstatesman.com/middle-east/2008/08/iraq-detainees-held-mnf-rights>

17 <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/torture/2008/0507surgeprison.htm>

18 <http://electroniciraq.net/news/directaidinitiative/index.shtml>

19 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/middle-east-and-north-africa/east-gulf/iraq>

20 <http://ivaw.org/>

21 [http://www.rhrc.org/pdf/Iraqi\\_women\\_girls\\_factsheet%20FINAL%20JAn08.pdf](http://www.rhrc.org/pdf/Iraqi_women_girls_factsheet%20FINAL%20JAn08.pdf)

tion was designed to limit the president's authority in the use of force without an official resolution or declaration of war by Congress. The War Powers Act requires that the president notify Congress within 48 hours of committing armed forces to military action and forbids armed forces from remaining for more than 60 days without an authorization of force or a declaration of war. Under the act, the president can only send combat troops into battle or into areas where "imminent" hostilities are likely, for 90 days without either a declaration of war by Congress or a specific Congressional mandate. Although it was passed as a response to the Vietnam War, the War Powers Act has been systematically ignored and abused.

**Solution:** Restore the War Powers Act.

**Obama's position:** Obama is a proponent of preemptive war, where necessary (as his rhetoric on Pakistan would suggest). He has no known position on restoring the War Powers Act.

**McCain's position:** McCain's approach to war-making gives no reason to believe that he would support restoring restrictions on his ability to do so as commander in chief.

**Learn more:** The Center for Constitutional Rights, "100 Days to Restore the Constitution"<sup>22</sup>, Congressional Research Service: "The War Powers Resolution: After Thirty Years"<sup>23</sup>, "What War Powers Does the President Have?"<sup>24</sup>

## 9. THE SO-CALLED WAR ON TERROR

Since the attacks of September 11, the advent of the so-called "War on Terror" has codified a U.S. military policy based on perpetual war-making. It was the legitimization of a doctrine of preemptive war -- begun under the Clinton administration -- that made the disaster in Iraq possible, and one that is likely to keep us in Afghanistan for years to come. An early contributing factor to the encoding of this policy was the Authorization for Use of Military Force passed on Sept. 18, 2001, which laid out the authority of the United States to respond to the 9/11 attacks, given the "unusual and extraordinary threat" to national security they represented. The AUMF also asserted the authority of the president "under the Constitution to take action to deter and prevent acts of international terrorism against the United States."

More recently, there have been more and more reasons to believe that as a counter-terror strategy and foreign policy, the "War on Terror" makes no sense and is in fact counterproductive. In 2006, a national intelligence report concluded that the Iraq War had worsened the terrorist threat to the United States. A recent report by the RAND Corporation concluded that the War on Terror itself has been unsuccessful in stamping out al Qaeda and that indeed, al Qaeda "has been involved in more terrorist attacks since Sept. 11, 2001, than it was during its prior history, and the group's attacks since then have spanned an increasingly broader range of targets in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa." What's more, the study found the very phrase "war on terror" inaccurate and ineffective, report-

22 <http://ccrjustice.org/100days>

23 <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/RL32267.html>

24 <http://www.slate.com/id/1008290>

ing, “Terrorists should be perceived and described as criminals, not holy warriors, and our analysis suggests that there is no battlefield solution to terrorism.”

**Solution:** Rethink and revise the so-called War on Terror, seeking alternative counterterrorism strategies. Repeal or revise the AUMF.

**Obama’s position:** Although he has vowed to emphasize diplomacy when talking to “our enemies,” Obama has proven himself a believer in the underlying premise of the so-called War on Terror, both through his stance on Afghanistan and his tough talk on Pakistan. In a speech in which he laid out “five ways America will begin to lead again when I’m president,” Obama described the first as “building the first truly 21st century military ... and showing wisdom in how we deploy it.” Such a military would “stay on the offense, from Djibouti to Kandahar.”

**McCain’s position:** McCain’s primary definition of terrorism is what he refers to as “violent Islamic extremism,” a threat that he would counter by building up the U.S. military, both by adding soldiers to its ranks and by designing high-tech weaponry like missile defense projects.

**Learn more:** RAND Corporation: “U.S. Should Rethink ‘War On Terrorism’ Strategy to Deal with Resurgent Al Qaida”<sup>25</sup>, The Iraq War Will Cost Us \$3 Trillion, and Much More<sup>26</sup>

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25 <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2008/07/29/>

26 [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/07/AR2008030702846\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/07/AR2008030702846_pf.html)