

Questions and Answers on the War in Iraq

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

November 2007

At the request of the Administrative Committee, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, Chairman of the Committee on International Policy, has prepared this summary of USCCB perspectives on Iraq.

Our nation cannot afford a shrill and shallow debate that distorts reality and reduces the options to 'cut and run' versus 'stay the course.' Instead we need a forthright discussion that begins with an honest assessment of the situation in Iraq and acknowledges both the mistakes that have been made and the signs of hope that have appeared. Most importantly, an honest assessment of our moral responsibilities toward Iraq should commit our nation to a policy of responsible transition.... Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as it takes for a responsible transition, leaving sooner rather than later.

Toward a Responsible Transition in Iraq, January 13, 2006

Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy

Any action or failure to act [in Iraq] should be measured by whether it ... contributes to a responsible withdrawal at the earliest time, or whether it is likely to increase divisions, violence, and loss of life. Another necessary step is more sustained U.S. leadership to address other deadly conflicts in this region, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Lebanon.

Evaluating Plans for a Responsible Transition in Iraq, January 12, 2007

A Statement of the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Bishop William S. Skylstad, Bishop of Spokane

1. What is the position of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on Iraq today?

The USCCB position is that the current situation in Iraq is unacceptable and unsustainable. Our nation must now focus more on the ethics of exit than on the ethics of intervention. The grave moral concerns we and others raised prior to the war now give way to new and different questions. We call for a “responsible transition” that ends the war as soon as possible in a way that minimizes further loss of life and meets the basic moral obligations of the U.S. to the Iraqi people and our own military personnel. Policy makers must take active steps to break the partisan stalemate in Washington in order to establish a new Iraq policy that embraces the challenging but limited goal of responsible transition. The goal of a responsible transition is neither an open-ended commitment nor a recipe for pre-emptive withdrawal.

This ethical framework of “responsible transition” was initially proposed in a January 2006 statement by Bishop Thomas Wenski, chairman of the Committee on International Policy, and was reaffirmed in a November 2006 statement that was discussed and affirmed by the full body of bishops in plenary assembly and in more recent statements and letters.

Our country needs a new direction to reduce the war's deadly toll and to bring our people together in an effort to deal with the conflict's moral and human dimensions. Our nation needs a new bipartisan approach to Iraq policy based on honest and civil dialogue.

2. What does USCCB mean by a “responsible transition?”

“Responsible transition” is a morally and politically demanding, but carefully limited goal that allows for a responsible withdrawal at the earliest opportunity. The moral demands of this transition begin with minimizing further loss of human life and addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, the refugee crisis in the region, and human rights, especially religious freedom.

Each course of action in Iraq should be weighed in light of the traditional moral principle of “probability of success,” i.e. the likelihood that the action will contribute to a “responsible transition” and withdrawal as soon as appropriate and possible. This principle requires our nation's leaders to be more realistic about the difficult situation in Iraq and more concerned about the likely consequences of a withdrawal that is too rapid or not rapid enough.

“Responsible transition” requires far more than military actions; it requires a more concerted diplomatic, political and economic strategy to address underlying factors of conflict. Policy makers should clearly define a limited military mission that reflects realistic goals and a just cause. Any military actions should aim to protect civilians and use proportionate and discriminate force when necessary.

3. If USCCB supports ending the military “deployment at the earliest opportunity,” isn't it supporting another version of “cut and run?”

No. The Bishops' Conference recognizes that many Iraqis now see the presence of U.S. troops as part of the problem that fuels the insurgency. At the same time, many Iraqis and others believe the U.S. cannot simply leave precipitously without helping to address the humanitarian crisis in the country and the need to rebuild.

4. What was the position of the Church and the Bishops' Conference prior to the Iraq war?

Prior to the war, Pope John Paul II, the Holy See, and USCCB repeatedly expressed grave moral concerns regarding a possible military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of an invasion and occupation. The Holy See and the Conference remain highly skeptical of the concept of “preventive war.”

5. If USCCB originally questioned the war, why doesn't the Conference favor an immediate withdrawal?

While the Bishops' Conference raised grave moral concerns regarding the decision to invade Iraq, once the United States initiated military action our nation incurred new moral responsibilities toward the Iraqi people. As the primary occupying power in Iraq, the United States has both legal responsibilities under international law and moral responsibilities to improve security, reduce further loss of life, and help rebuild the country.

6. What is the Conference's position on fighting terrorism?

Terrorism is a crime against humanity. The Bishops' Conference unequivocally condemns all acts of terrorism. The nation has a moral right and a grave obligation to defend the common good against terrorism and to protect its people. Bolstering homeland security, denying funding to terrorist organizations and a wide range of non-military measures must be pursued. Military action may also be required. In the necessary confrontation with terrorists, our nation must guard against excessive military responses that endanger civilians, abuse prisoners or violate international humanitarian law. Such responses can abrogate human rights and undermine efforts to win hearts and minds in Iraq and throughout the Arab world. In addition, terrorism cannot be fought solely with military methods; we must address the poverty, powerlessness and injustice that terrorist leaders exploit to gain recruits.

7. Why is the Conference concerned about religious freedom in Iraq?

Religious freedom must be protected as a matter of principle, but also to promote human rights and lay the foundation for tolerance and democracy. It would be tragic if Christians and other religious minorities had less religious freedom in post-war Iraq. Sadly, Christians and other religious minorities are suffering disproportionately from the widespread violence in Iraq and are disproportionately represented among internally displaced persons and refugees. Post-war Iraq should be a nation where people of different religions and ethnicities can live together.

8. What should our nation do about the refugee crisis?

Our nation and others must provide more support for the more than two million refugees and asylum seekers who have fled Iraq. Our Bishops' Conference urges the U.S. and other nations to provide greater support, including designating Iraqi religious minorities fleeing Iraq as a group of special concern for the purposes of refugee status and giving greater attention to Iraqi asylum requests in the United States. In addition, it is critical for the U.S. to assist other nations in the region who are struggling with a large influx of refugees, more than two million in neighboring countries. Greater humanitarian and development assistance must also be provided to the more than two million internally displaced Iraqis who have fled their homes.

9. How have the bishops expressed support for U.S. military personnel and their families?

The Bishops' Conference has repeatedly expressed support for the military and their families who bear a disproportionate burden of the struggle in Iraq. Raising grave moral questions regarding the war, its conduct and its aftermath, is not to question the commitment, skills courage and integrity of military personnel. The Conference's criticism of the treatment of prisoners and detainees does not question the behavior of the vast majority of those in the military who serve with honor.

In addition, the Conference believes there is a moral obligation to deal with the human, medical, mental health and social costs of military action. We have a duty to heal and care. Our nation must ask: What is the moral basis for the continuing sacrifices of our military personnel? Who bears the sacrifices and burdens of this war? How will our nation bring healing and long-term help to individuals, families and communities?

10. What does the Church teach about decisions of conscience and military service?

Both decisions to serve in the military and to refrain from such service ought to be guided by a well-formed conscience. As the bishops reiterated in 2002: “We support those who risk their lives in the service of our nation. We also support those who seek to exercise their right to conscientious objection and selective conscientious objection....”

11. How does the Bishops’ Conference view the concept of “preventive war?”

In light of the moral criteria of the just war tradition, the Bishops’ Conference and the Holy See remain highly skeptical of the concept of “preventive war.” As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* clearly states: “[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions.” (# 501)

12. Has the Bishops’ Conference spoken out on other conflicts in the volatile region of the Middle East?

Yes, the Conference has said that Iraq’s future stability is related to the stability of the region. For this reason, U.S. leadership is essential to advance a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians. The achievement of a fair and just Israeli-Palestinian agreement would help the region and deprive extremists of a cause they exploit to promote hate and violence. Our Conference has also expressed deep concern regarding the difficult situation involving our nation, the international community and Iran, and has urged caution, determination, and restraint in the use of force. In addition, volatile situations in Lebanon, Pakistan and Afghanistan raise significant moral questions and require attention if regional stability is to be enhanced.

13. Where can I find more information on the position of USCCB on the Iraq war?

For more information, visit: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/>.