

Obama on the Brink: War or Peace?

By [Prof. Marjorie Cohn](#)

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Once again, we are poised on the brink of a war that could violate US and international law. President Barack Obama faces a critical decision: will he meaningfully pursue a peaceful solution – even collaborating with Israel’s archenemy Iran – or will he succumb to pressure from the hawks responsible for destabilizing Iraq during the misnamed “Operation Iraqi Freedom?”

The Crisis in Iraq and “Operation Iraqi Freedom”

After two horrific wars that killed millions of people, the countries of the world adopted the United Nations Charter “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Although the Charter is part of US law, President Obama is poised to violate it if he mounts a military attack on Iraq.

All hell has broken loose in Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its Sunni allies have taken control of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city; they control most of the western and northern sections of Iraq, and they’re headed for Baghdad. Nearly 500 civilians have been killed and more than 1,600 have been wounded. Close to 53,000 people have been displaced from Anbar Province. The bloodshed is directly attributable to the illegal and ill-advised 2003 US-led invasion of – and regime change in – Iraq.

ISIS, a Syrian group, is a successor to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which did not even exist before “Operation Iraqi Freedom” destabilized Iraq and much of the Middle East, attracting extremist groups. The US-led war wreaked devastation on Iraq, killing tens of thousands of Iraqis and leaving untold numbers maimed. The war and punishing sanctions destroyed Iraq’s infrastructure, leaving the country in shambles.

Saddam Hussein, who was deposed and later executed by US-supported forces, was a secular Sunni Muslim. Although a tyrant (like many of the dictators the United States has supported), he held Iraq together, preventing it from devolving into sectarian chaos.

“Operation Iraqi Freedom” was based on the lie that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that he would share with al-Qaeda. The price of the US-led war there was astronomical. The Costs of War report, just issued by Brown University, found that the war in Iraq claimed 190,000 lives and will cost the United States at least \$2.2 trillion. More than 70 percent, or about 134,000, of the dead were civilians. Of those killed, 4,488 were US troops, and at least 3,400 were US contractors (mercenaries). Moreover, the US government has spent \$60 billion on reconstruction in Iraq, most of which has gone to the Iraqi military and police, not to rebuild the country’s infrastructure.

“Operation Iraqi Freedom” also violated the United Nations (UN) Charter, which forbids a

country from using military force against another country unless carried out in self-defense or with the blessing of the UN Security Council. Iraq had not attacked any country since it went into Kuwait in 1990, and the Security Council did not sanction the 2003 US-led attack on Iraq. George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld mounted a war of aggression in Iraq, a crime the judges at Nuremberg called “the supreme international crime.”

Repression by al-Maliki

The US-led invasion of Iraq helped install Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, a Shiite Muslim, as prime minister. But instead of uniting the different religious groups after the US troops left two and a half years ago, the al-Maliki government viciously cracked down on its opponents. Torture, rape and arbitrary, mass arrests of Sunnis were common. Protestors were murdered, their leaders assassinated. What began as a peaceful opposition movement during the “Iraqi Spring” turned violent in response to al-Maliki’s repression. Many of those nonviolent protestors have joined ISIS.

Some Republicans argue that Obama should have kept our troops in Iraq instead of withdrawing them two years ago in accordance with the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) the Bush administration negotiated. In fact, Obama, who later took credit for pulling US troops out of Iraq, tried to negotiate a new SOFA with the Iraqi government to postpone our departure. However, al-Maliki refused to continue to grant US soldiers immunity for any criminal or civil wrongs they might commit. This followed Chelsea Manning’s publication of the “Collateral Murder Video,” which depicted the commission of war crimes by US forces in Iraq.

More US intervention in Iraq?

Meanwhile, “the US government – the prime cause of these problems to begin with – prepares to intervene however it chooses,” according to Falah Alwan, of the Federation of Workers’ Councils and Unions in Iraq.

US Secretary of State John Kerry announced that Obama was considering all available options, including drone strikes, in Iraq. Manned US warplanes based in the Gulf might also be used to mount air strikes. This course of action promises to exacerbate the violence and could prove disastrous, inviting terrorist attacks against US interests in the Gulf. US defense and intelligence officials told The Daily Beast that the Pentagon and CIA are not sure exactly who US forces should target. Bombing would inevitably kill many civilians in urban areas. Moreover, the United States would once again be violating the UN Charter. The United States would not be acting in self-defense because Iraq has not attacked us or any other UN member country. And the Security Council has not given its approval for a US attack on Iraq; the United States would have to secure agreement from all five permanent Council members: the Russian Federation, China, France, United Kingdom and United States.

Under the War Powers Resolution, the President can introduce US troops into hostilities, or into situations “where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances,” only after (1) a Congressional declaration of war, (2) “specific statutory authorization,” or (3) in “a national emergency created by attack upon the United States, its territories or possessions, or its armed forces.” This is the current situation: First, Congress has not declared war. Second, neither the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force

(AUMF) (which Bush used to invade Iraq), nor the 2001 AUMF (which Bush used to invade Afghanistan), would provide a legal basis for an attack on Iraq at the present time. Third, there has been no attack on the United States or US armed forces. Moreover, the UN Charter only allows a military attack on another country in the case of self-defense or when the Security Council authorizes it; neither is the case at the present time.

Obama has ordered 275 US troops to Iraq to protect the US embassy there. He has reserved the option of sending 100 “security forces” who would coordinate US airstrikes, share intelligence with Iraqi security forces, and provide the Iraqi army with tactical advice. If Obama attacks Iraq, “Bush’s war” will become “Obama’s war.”

But Obama is poised on the horns of a dilemma. On June 13, he said, “We’re also going to pursue intensive diplomacy throughout this period both inside of Iraq and across the region.” Obama has expressed a willingness to collaborate with Iran, a Shiite-led country with close ties to the al-Maliki government, about ending the bloodshed in Iraq. This is a positive development, which hopefully will encompass broader issues, including the conflict in Syria, where Iran supports President Bashar al-Assad.

Kerry called ISIS an “existential” danger to Iraq. Ironically, Israel considers Iran an “existential” threat to its security. Thus far, Obama has proceeded cautiously with Iran during negotiations over Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program, but, siding with Israel, maintains that “all options are on the table,” including US military force against Iran.

Obama has an unprecedented opportunity to be a real peacemaker in Iraq. The wisest course of action is a diplomatic solution that embraces the entire region. The United States should propose a resolution in the Security Council that would require an immediate ceasefire in Iraq and peacekeepers under UN auspices be sent to Iraq. Obama should also return to the Geneva process in collaboration with Iran, and seek a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The Security Council should pass a resolution mandating an immediate ceasefire in Syria and a peaceful resolution of that dispute. Iran, which supports the al-Maliki government in Iraq and the Assad regime in Syria, is key to any regional peace agreement in the Middle East. Peace is within reach if Obama has the fortitude to stand up to the “experts” who are invariably advising him to pursue military options in Iraq. What course will he choose?

Marjorie Cohn is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, a former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and deputy secretary general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. Her books include Cowboy Republic: Six Ways the Bush Gang Has Defied the Law. Her next book, Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral and Geopolitical Issues, will be published this fall.

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Articles by: [Prof. Marjorie Cohn](#)

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