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(Note: This is the text of a letter that was sent to the Members of Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor.)

As the Congress and our country face important decisions about the terrible dilemmas and realities in Iraq, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops seeks to draw on our moral teaching to raise some difficult ethical questions regarding the road ahead.

Our Church ministers among our troops and shares deep spiritual ties to the Church and people in Iraq. As pastors and teachers, we are convinced that the current situation in Iraq is unacceptable and unsustainable. In this letter, we reiterate the goal of a “responsible transition” as an ethical framework for national decisions.

We view with alarm the political stalemate in Washington and urge the leaders of both parties in the executive and legislative branches to work together to move beyond the current partisan paralysis. 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.

The Conference encourages our nation’s leaders to focus on the morally and politically demanding, but carefully limited goal of fostering a “responsible transition” and withdrawal. The moral demands of this transition begin with addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and minimizing further loss of human life.

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 difficult questions: What actions will do the most good and least harm? What elements of a responsible transition are attainable? How can they be achieved? What actions should be avoided?

Building a just peace in Iraq requires far more than military actions; it requires a comprehensive political and diplomatic effort. Policy makers should clearly define a limited military mission that reflects realistic goals and a just cause. Should our policy focus more on improving dire humanitarian conditions rather than on the more ambitious goal of establishing a pluralistic democracy? Does a continuing and substantial U.S. presence impede or postpone needed accommodation and hard choices by the Iraqis? How can decision-makers take into account both the realities and setbacks in Iraq and the likely human consequences of rapid withdrawal? What are the financial costs and global consequences of continued war and occupation?

As the mission in Iraq is re-focused, our leaders should reiterate our nation’s pledge not to seek permanent military bases in Iraq nor control over Iraqi oil resources.

A neglected policy priority is the dire situation of refugees, internally displaced persons, Christians and other vulnerable minorities in Iraq. The suffering of the Christian community has a particular claim on our hearts and consciences, but we recognize that Christians are not alone in their plight.

The U.S. should immediately make more substantial commitments to Iraqi refugees by expanding admissions, eliminating roadblocks to resettlement, and supporting countries in the region burdened with war-related refugee populations.

U.S. efforts to collaborate with other nations, including Syria and Iran, are critically important for bringing a measure of stability to Iraq. Recent U.N. initiatives related to Iraq are hopeful signs, but working multilaterally will require the U.S. to yield a level of control to others. Given how the conflict was initiated, real international cooperation may be difficult to achieve, yet it remains indispensable. The work of stabilizing and rebuilding Iraq rests primarily with Iraqis, but the United States and other nations must help Iraqis when they attempt to move forward. Given the extensive devastation in Iraq, the U.S. has a unique and inescapable obligation to continue to support development and reconstruction.

Iraq's future stability is related to the stability of the region. For this reason, U.S. leadership to advance a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians is critical. The continuing failure to achieve the vision of two states living side by side in peace and justice makes everything else in the region more difficult. Real progress toward a fair Israeli-Palestinian agreement would help stabilize the region and deprive extremists of a cause they exploit to promote hate and violence.

In all military actions, ethical norms require protecting civilians, using proportionate and discriminate force, rejecting torture, and fighting terrorism with nonmilitary means and the legitimate use of force when necessary.

U.S. policy must take into account the growing costs and consequences of a continued occupation on military personnel, their families and our nation. There is a moral obligation to deal with the human, medical, mental health and social costs of military action. Our nation should 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?

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.

In closing we return to our heartfelt plea that the Administration and the Congress begin to work together to bring an end to this war and occupation at the earliest opportunity consistent with the limited goal of a responsible transition and the protection of human lives—Iraqi and American.

Sincerely yours,

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