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Culture & Society

Losing Hearts and Minds

Understanding America's Failure in Iraq

Samer Shehata

Although the future of Iraq remains uncertain, the United States has already lost the war for Iraqi hearts and minds. The war of diplomacy was lost not because of biased reporting in the Arab media or the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, but primarily because of a series of policy mistakes, broken promises, and the failure to meet basic obligations. Nearly two years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, significant parts of Iraq remain entrenched in a Hobbesian nightmare. In addition to the absence of law and order, basic services have only recently reached prewar levels in much of the country. In Tikrit, Fallujah, and Baghdad, cities favored under the previous regime, residents have less electricity and clean water than they did before the war.

No amount of refurbished schools, democracy programs, or good intentions can compensate for these conditions, which many blame—rightly or wrongly—on the United States and the now defunct Coalitional Provisional Authority (CPA). By faulting the old regime, the condition of the country's infrastructure before the war, or the continuing violence, the United States is unlikely to win the sympathy of ordinary Iraqis. Even if elections in January 2005 are "successful," it is unlikely that this will be sufficient to convince Iraqis that America is trustworthy and deserving of their support.

Samer Shehata teaches Middle East and Arab politics at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He traveled to Iraq both before and after the war.

The future will likely bring intensified counterinsurgency operations, increased urban fighting, corresponding resistance, and inevitable civilian casualties,

from experts was employed by administration officials to sell the war to the American public.²

One of the many problems with such naively optimistic predictions is that they failed to recognize the possibility that Iraqis, while welcoming the end of Saddam's regime, simultaneously disdained the idea of foreign troops in their country. The course of the occupation has only made matters worse.

An Army War College report, *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario*, presciently stated, "Long-term gratitude is unlikely and suspicion of U.S. motives will increase as the occupation continues. A force initially viewed as liberators can rapidly be relegated to the status of invaders should an unwelcome occupation continue for a prolonged time. Occupation problems may be especially acute if the United States must implement the bulk of the occupation itself rather than turn these duties over to a postwar international force."³

Polling data has confirmed this assessment. When Iraqis were asked in late March and April of 2004 how they viewed Coalition forces at the time of the invasion, they were equally divided with 43 percent responding that they viewed forces as "liberators" and 43 percent saying that they saw them as "occupiers." When asked how they viewed Coalition forces one year later, 71 percent said they viewed them as "occupiers."⁴ More recent polling conducted by Oxford Research International in June 2004 produced similar findings. When asked whether the

"We shall be mobbed when we go there, by people who are eager for deliverance from the tyranny and the great big prison of Saddam Hussein. ... We shall be greeted, I think, in Baghdad and Basra with kites and boom boxes, and we should understand this."

-Fouad Ajami

Testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee¹

that will further embitter Iraqis. From the perspective of most citizens, the United States and the CPA received failing grades long ago.

What mistakes did the United States and the CPA make that resulted in the present state of affairs? What do Iraqis think of the current situation, the coalition forces, and the continued American presence? And how will the continuing violence likely impact Iraqi opinion of the interim government and the United States? Answering these questions is essential for assessing the prospects for Iraq's future.

"Kites and Boom Boxes." Those who spoke before the war about Iraqis welcoming American troops with "kites and boom boxes," such as Fouad Ajami, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, mischaracterized the situation. Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi Professor at Brandeis University, told President Bush during a visit to the Oval Office that invading American troops would be greeted with "sweets and flowers." This kind of politically motivated misinformation coming

U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was right or wrong, 59.2 percent of respondents said that it was wrong.⁵

Iraqis, even those who wanted the removal of Saddam Hussein, were ambivalent about a foreign occupation. The course of the occupation—a series of policy mistakes and failures to meet basic obligations combined with high Iraqi expectations—paved the way for America's defeat in the war for Iraqi hearts and minds.

Security Failures. Security remains the primary concern among Iraqis. The failure of the CPA and Coalition forces to provide security against car-jackings, kidnappings, armed robbery, rape, and other kinds of banditry—in addition to the insecurity caused by attacks on troops and Iraqi security forces—is the chief complaint.⁶ Iraqis simply do not feel safe, and many—quite possibly the majority—hold the United States responsible for

dependent upon security, and the absence of it restricts what can be achieved. Following the fall of the regime in April 2003, the unwillingness or inability of Coalition forces to stop widespread looting produced an environment of chaos, encouraged criminal elements, and amplified the difficulties of reconstruction. Andrew Natsios, the head of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), explained, "The war damaged very little. The larger damage was from the looting, which is a serious problem, but the biggest problem was the lack of maintenance over the last 20 years."⁸

The decision to disband the Iraqi army and police force after the fall of Baghdad have also directly contributed to the continuing security problem, producing at least two negative outcomes. First, the country was left without the institutions most capable of maintaining law and order: security personnel familiar with

Iraqis simply do not feel safe, and many—quite possibly the majority—hold the U.S. responsible for this situation.

this situation.⁷ We must precisely understand, however, what Iraqis mean by "security." When Iraqis speak of security, they are referring to the safety of ordinary citizens. Naturally, Iraqis are more concerned about their own safety than the safety of American GIs, just as Americans pay more attention to lost American lives than to Iraqi casualties.

Security is fundamental to postwar reconstruction, investment, commerce, civic involvement, education, and everyday life. Every element of Iraqi society is

local communities and neighborhoods, fluent in Arabic, and knowledgeable of Iraqi culture. Second, disbanding the army and police produced thousands of disenfranchised men, trained in military and security operations, now without jobs or income, unsure of their future in the new Iraq, and embittered at the CPA and the United States. A more narrow elimination of Saddam loyalists in both institutions could have proven more effective at maintaining security in the postwar environment.

Insufficient troop presence coupled with the wrong types of forces—combat soldiers as opposed to trained peacekeepers and military police—also negatively impacted the security situation.⁹ General Eric Shinseki, former Army Chief of Staff, asserted, “several hundred thousand soldiers” would be needed for a postwar occupying force, based on his experience in postwar Bosnia.¹⁰ This sentiment was later contradicted by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who went on to say that Iraq had no history of ethnic strife.¹¹ Experts on post-conflict situations have stated that, based on past

only recently reached prewar levels of electricity production. For some, electricity is the metric for measuring America’s success—or lack thereof—in terms of public service delivery.

The Department of Defense estimated prewar levels of electricity production in Iraq to be 4,400 megawatts daily. In the entire period of the CPA’s existence, the seven-day average of peak electricity production never reached prewar levels. Only in July 2004 did nationwide average electricity production begin to creep above these levels.¹³ This corresponds to Iraqi impressions revealed through

Every house raid on law-abiding families turns an entire street against Coalition forces; every wrongful detention creates a neighborhood opposed to the American presence.

peacekeeping missions, the ratio of troops/peacekeepers to civilians in Iraq has been woefully inadequate. The ratio of foreign troops to civilians in Iraq is presently less than one to one hundred, but many specialists believe the appropriate ratio in such situations to be two peacekeepers for every one hundred civilians. In order for this ratio to be met, approximately 480,000 troops would need to be deployed.¹² In Iraq, too few troops have been asked to act as peacekeepers, something they are not well equipped to do in the first place.

Public Services. Electricity is the single most important public service affecting Iraqi opinion of the U.S. presence because it has a direct impact on many aspects of daily life. Much of Iraq has

polling data. In Spring 2004, 100 percent of Iraqis surveyed said they “go without electricity for long periods of time.” Remarkably, this figure was up from 99 percent in 2003.¹⁴ More recently a report published in September 2004 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies stated, “Across the board, Iraqis remain unhappy with the level of basic services they are receiving.”¹⁵

After security, electricity is the second leading source of criticism of the current situation. It remains a topic of daily conversation, with many Iraqis incredulous that the most powerful country in the world cannot significantly increase electricity production in the country, nearly two years after the war. Many Iraqis believe this is a deliberate policy on the

part of the United States, with some observers dubbing this "the man on the moon syndrome," because Iraqis have been asking, "If the U.S. can put a man on the moon, why can't they turn the lights back on in Baghdad?"¹⁶

The availability of clean water and adequate sewage is in large part dependent upon adequate electricity production. By many accounts, "Sewage systems are worse than they were under Saddam, causing spillover health and environmental problems."¹⁷

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Before the war, Iraq pumped 3 million cubic meters of water per day from 140 water treatment facilities." More than a year after the war, however, facilities operated "at about 65 percent of that capacity, mainly because of electricity shortages and the looting of water plant generators used to pump water and sewage."¹⁸ In June 2004, USAID found that

Baghdad's three sewage treatment plants, which together comprise three-quarters of the nation's sewage treatment capacity, are inoperable, allowing the waste from 3.8 million people to flow untreated directly into the Tigris River. In the rest of the country, most sewage treatment plants were only partially operational prior to the conflict, and shortages of electricity, parts, and chemicals have exacerbated the situation.¹⁹

By the end of June 2004, Bechtel, the firm contracted to rebuild Iraq's sewage system, had opened only one of Baghdad's water treatment plants. Despite the work that has been completed by USAID and its contractors, Iraq's

water and sewage systems remain woefully inadequate.

Unemployment. Mass unemployment continues to be a serious problem that directly impacts Iraqis' assessments of the current situation. Unemployment is also a security issue. In addition to fueling frustration and resentment toward the U.S. presence, large pools of jobless men have become a source of potential recruits for the insurgency. The White House's Office of Management and Budget described the unemployment as "a persistent source of insecurity and instability for the country," and estimated it to be between 20 and 30 percent of the workforce in March 2004.²⁰ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) put the figure at 60 percent for the same month. They went on to warn, "The regional picture in Iraq is extremely mixed, with some recent reports suggesting that unemployment throughout the more impoverished and long-underdeveloped Shia-dominated South could be running as high as 80 percent."²¹

There is insufficient space here to compare the level of other public services, infrastructure, and economic activity in Iraq before the war, at the time of the handover in June 2004, and in the second half of 2004. It should be noted, however, that on every account Iraqi expectations were far greater than what the United States delivered.²²

How Iraqis Experience the U.S. Presence.

How some Iraqis experience the American military presence in their country also negatively affects attitudes and opinions toward the United States. Stories of house raids in the middle of the night—with heavily armed troops kicking down doors, frightening women and

children, and humiliating family members in the process—circulate and have embittered Iraqis, whether or not they have been involved in the insurgency. Long, seemingly arbitrary detentions, with little or no justification, have been a grievance voiced by many. On some accounts, Iraqis also resent U.S. military convoys because they inspire insurgent violence in urban areas and at checkpoints. Civilian casualties, of course, are an altogether different matter.

Iraqis have an overall negative impression of U.S. military forces according to various polls. In June 2004, CPA polling found that 80 percent of Iraqis have an unfavorable opinion of American troops.²³ A CNN/USAToday/Gallup Poll, taken two months earlier found that 58 percent of Iraqis said that U.S. forces had conducted themselves either “fairly badly” or “very badly.” Another worrisome finding was that the number of respondents who said that attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq could be justified increased sharply from last year. In 2003, 42 percent of respondents in Baghdad said that attacks against U.S. forces “cannot be justified at all.” That figure fell to 14 percent in 2004. The impact of house raids, wrongful detention, the disproportionate use of force, and civilian casualties goes well beyond the individuals directly involved. Every house raid on law-abiding families turns an entire street against Coalition forces; every wrongful detention creates a neighborhood opposed to the American presence; and every civilian casualty produces an extended family embittered against the United States.

The logic of defeating an insurgency militarily runs counter to the logic of winning the war for the hearts and minds of the general population. Counterinsurgency

operations necessarily result in urban fighting, damage to neighborhoods, and civilian casualties. Nervous soldiers, risking their lives and under attack, are understandably more interested in staying alive than in winning public favor. Political success cannot be achieved primarily through military means. The case of Fallujah is particularly illustrative.

Iraqi Reaction to Fallujah. The overwhelming majority of Iraqis perceived U.S. military conduct in Fallujah in March 2004 as an unjustified and disproportionate use of force against a civilian population. From the perspective of the war for hearts and minds, the events of Fallujah were disastrous, infuriating most Iraqis and inflaming anti-American sentiment.

The murder of four security contract workers on 31 March 2004 and the gruesome mutilation of two of their bodies were unconscionable. The response of the U.S. military, however, was perceived as excessively brutal and was denounced across the country. An entire town of nearly three hundred thousand residents was under siege for more than a week while U.S. Marines used heavy weaponry in civilian neighborhoods. The result was more than 700 killed and over 1200 wounded, many of whom were women and children.²⁴ Scenes of families burying their dead in the courtyards of their homes, in soccer fields, and in hospital parking lots elicited outrage and condemnation from all quarters of Iraqi society. Images of scores of wounded pouring into hospitals with insufficient medicines and supplies produced feelings of solidarity with the residents of Fallujah across Iraq. This was seen as a battle between David and Goliath with the U.S. military as Goliath. Dozens of

convoys of food, humanitarian supplies, and medicine from all over Iraq, including from the Turkmen minority in Kirkuk, the Chaldean Christians in Baghdad, and the country's Shiite majority demonstrated the extent to which Iraqis of all stripes sympathized with the residents of Fallujah.

At that time, Iraq's human rights minister and its interior minister resigned in protest of against U.S. military conduct, calling it a clear violation of human rights.²⁵ The current president, Ghazi al-Yawer, who served on the Iraqi Governing Council at the time, threatened to resign and described the crisis as "genocide."²⁶ Adnan Pachachi, a former ambassador and presidential nominee, declared the U.S. military action "illegal and unacceptable" and described it as

election boycott while Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr denounced the offensive, with Sadr calling on Iraqis not to participate in the fighting. Even Ghazi al-Yawer publicly distanced himself from the attack on Fallujah.

Conclusions. Although the fighting continues in Iraq, the war for hearts and minds has already been lost. The inability to provide security, basic services, and employment are the main reasons behind America's failure in the war of diplomacy. Iraqis, like Americans, base their judgments on performance, and the U.S. performance in Iraq has so far been disastrous.²⁸

However, according to various polling data, Iraqis, by and large, remain opti-

Plans to establish a permanent U.S. military presence in Iraq must be immediately abandoned. Such a presence would be a continuing source of instability.

"collective punishment."²⁷ The siege of Fallujah in March and April 2004 solidified and exacerbated anti-Coalition and anti-American sentiment.

The second Fallujah campaign in November 2004 also elicited intense criticism. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), the largest Sunni political organization, withdrew from the interim government and vowed to boycott the upcoming elections. The IIP also announced that forty other organizations would boycott the elections as a result of the Fallujah offensive. The influential Association of Muslim Scholars also called for an

mistic about the future. Sixty-six percent of Iraqis feel their lives will be better one year from now, according to a poll commissioned by the International Republican Institute in August 2004.²⁹ Moreover, in June 2004, the Oxford Survey of Iraq found approximately 86 percent of Iraqis optimistic that the security situation would improve after elections in January 2005.

It would be a mistake, however, to take comfort in these figures. Rather than reflecting either satisfaction with the current situation or optimism about the future, unmet Iraqi expectations could

produce even more instability in the future. If these expectations are not met, attitudes toward Coalition forces, the United States, and by extension the Iraqi interim government could deteriorate further. Unfulfilled expectations have long been considered a cause of resentment, frustration, instability, and even violent political activity.³⁰

Increased offensive operations before the proposed Iraqi elections could also result in increased hostility toward the United States and Coalition forces. Counterinsurgency operations produce the perception of heavy-handedness, the indiscriminate use of force, and collective punishment. Occupation and counterinsurgency are, therefore, self-defeating.³¹

Pursuing a new strategy is likely to be more effective than continuing the present policy. The character of the occupation, including the foreign military presence in Iraq, must drastically change. The United States must be willing to give up control in exchange for a commitment of troops and security forces from other countries, including Muslim nations. In short, this means internationalizing the occupation and significantly increasing the numbers of troops and international peacekeepers in the country. Second, more attention must be focused on providing security for ordinary Iraqis—in addition to more narrowly targeted efforts at combating the insurgency. Third, the United States must pour massive amounts of money into the country. Large-scale public works programs employing tens of thou-

sands of Iraqis, especially young men, must be initiated. Money alone will not stabilize Iraq, but it can help if appropriately targeted. Fourth, plans of establishing a permanent U.S. military presence in Iraq—there has been talk of fourteen military bases—must be immediately abandoned. Such a presence would surely become a continuing source of instability. Finally, Syria, Iran, and Turkey must be positively induced to play a role in facilitating the development of a prosperous, secure Iraq at peace with its neighbors. None of these recommendations is likely to be adopted by the current U.S. administration. Not doing so, however, risks a continuation—if not deterioration—of the current Iraqi situation.

The struggle for the sympathies of ordinary Iraqis will affect whether Iraqis side with Coalition forces and the interim government against the insurgency or whether they place their trust and support elsewhere. In the long run, this campaign for the hearts and minds will affect how Iraqis, Arabs, and other Muslims perceive and act towards the United States. The battle for Iraqi public opinion will also affect whether the Iraq war ultimately makes America safer or more vulnerable. It will determine whether the human and financial cost incurred in Fallujah, Ramadi, Samara, and Najaf will serve to increase resentment, that could metastasize into violence and new recruits in the war against America, or whether it will greatly reduce terrorist recruiting pools. The bad news is that American failure is not merely expected; it is a *fait accompli*.

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