

How Iraqis View U.S. Role Is Key to Evaluating Progress in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Reports about U.S. casualties inevitably take top billing in media coverage of postwar Iraq. Yet, assessing how Iraqis themselves view the current situation is, arguably, just as important for evaluating progress in Iraq. Two recent public opinion polls have provided systematic data about Iraqi views, and this data in turn complements mounting anecdotal evidence regarding daily life in post-Saddam Iraq.

Polls: Growing Optimism, Lingering Suspicions

Recent Gallup and Zogby International polls show consistent results: most Iraqis are optimistic, but they do not welcome a long-term U.S. role in Iraq. Gallup surveyed 1,178 Baghdad residents in late August and early September. Asked whether the ousting of Saddam Husayn was worth any hardships they have suffered since the coalition intervention, 62% answered yes and 30% no. Among the million residents of Sadr City, the poor Shi'i district of the capital, 78% of respondents answered yes, a figure that lends perspective to accounts of anti-American agitation in the area by radical Shi'i Islamists (e.g., firebrand cleric Muqtada Sadr). In contrast, respondents from the relatively affluent mixed-sect al-Karkh district were evenly divided, with 47% answering yes and 47% no. Similar differences emerged when those polled were asked whether the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is doing a good job: Sadr City respondents largely answered yes (37% positive, 13% negative) while al-Karkh respondents largely answered no (38% negative, 20% positive) (the remaining respondents were neutral).

In August, Zogby International polled 598 residents of Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk, and al-Ramadi, the latter a center of Sunni Arab resistance to coalition forces. The poll did not ask whether the overthrow of Saddam was worthwhile. Asked how long coalition troops should remain in Iraq, 25% of respondents answered two or more years, compared to 32% who said that coalition forces should leave in six months. The latter group included some individuals who, while friendly to the United States (e.g., Ahmed Chalabi), are optimistic that Iraqis can take over within a short time.

All of these polls indicate that Iraqis are optimistic about the future. According to 67% of Baghdadis and 69% of those in the four regional cities, Iraq will be better off in five years, compared to 8% and 20%, respectively, who think the country will be worse off. When asked whether the CPA was doing a better job than it had been two months earlier, 50% of Baghdadis answered yes, only 14% said no, and 33% saw no difference. Moreover, 61% of Baghdad

respondents expressed favorable views of the Iraqi Governing Council, compared to only 13% with negative views. Although they are optimistic about improvements, Baghdadis have mixed views about the present. Asked whether Iraq is better or worse off than it was before the invasion, 29% answered "somewhat better" while 32% answered "somewhat worse," with 15% saying "much worse" and only 4% "much better" (the remaining respondents were neutral). These attitudes are no doubt related to the fact that 94% of the respondents feel that the capital is more dangerous than it was before the invasion.

One continuing problem is Iraqi suspicion toward the United States. Among Baghdadis, 44% expressed a negative view of the United States compared to only 29% offering a favorable view. In the four regional cities, 50% think the United States will hurt Iraq over the next five years while 35% think the United States will help; among Sunni Arabs in the Zogby sample, the split is 70% hurt, 13% help. (Sunni Arabs constituted roughly 27% of the Zogby sample. Although the poll results do not list Sunni Arabs separately, they do differentiate between Sunnis and Kurds; subtracting Kurds from Sunnis produces a good approximation for Sunni Arabs).

The Zogby poll also asked respondents whether Iraq should have an Islamic regime or a government that allows citizens to practice their own religion. Overall, 33% favored an Islamic government. Yet, 62% percent of Sunni Arab respondents called for an Islamic government, compared to only 27% of Shi'i respondents; this finding lends perspective to reports of Shi'i support for Iranian-style clerical rule.

Anecdotal Evidence: Daily Life Goes On Despite Problems

The polling data above is fully consistent with anecdotal observations regarding the nature of post-Saddam life in Iraq, some appearing in numerous press accounts and others gained during the author's own recent 700-mile trip across southern and central Iraq riding in taxis and various beat-up cars and hitchhiking. These observations show that daily life goes on with ups and downs relative to the prewar period.

One striking development has been the CPA's abolition of taxes. Iraq has become one huge duty-free zone, with imports flooding in at much lower prices than in the past. For example, a used Chevrolet Caprice that cost 18 million dinars (\$9,000) before the war now sells for 8 million. As a result, some 300,000 imported vehicles have reportedly been sold in Iraq since the war, with midprice used cars disappearing from the car lots of countries as far away as the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, the bazaars are full of inexpensive clothing from Southeast Asia, while the sidewalks in front of shops in Baghdad and Basra are stacked high with every type of consumer durable, especially air conditioners, freezers, washing machines, and televisions. Major importers talk of excellent sales, while industrialists complain vociferously about the flood of what they claim are unfair imports, which force them to close factories (Saddam-era controls and UN sanctions created hothouse conditions for local factories, which are now facing a cold blast due to imports).

Current income levels are difficult to judge. Teachers are no doubt happy: although they have not received all of their paychecks on time, their salaries have been raised from \$5-7 per month to \$120 per month. Unemployment has risen dramatically, however, despite growth in the informal trade sector (small traders and service providers abound) and the creation of numerous CPA-funded street-sweeping and irrigation canal-cleaning crews. As for reported economic discontent among Sunni tribes, some individuals who were close to Saddam's regime say that these tribes reacted in such a manner in the past when they did not get the large cash payoffs they demanded.

Security remains a concern, but Iraqis are more worried about thieves than about anticoalition resistance. From rich businessmen to taxi drivers, the primary fear in Baghdad is of being carjacked or murdered during a robbery, particularly given the fact that Saddam released all criminals from prison before his regime fell. More troops or a broader coalition would not necessarily solve this problem. Indeed, many Iraqis commented favorably on the low profile of coalition forces -- the author's own 700-mile trip was interrupted by only five checkpoints, all manned by

Iraqis. The Iraqi police are beginning to make their presence felt. For the first time ever, they are patrolling in cars (Saddam's police simply sat in their stationhouses), and Baghdad traffic officers are fitfully helping at the most clogged intersections. Outside the capital, security is vastly improved; for instance, on one Thursday night in Basra, men and women could be seen strolling in and out of the fanciest hotel with no security in sight.

Noticeable progress has been made on other problems as well. Gasoline stations in central urban areas had only short lines, while those in suburbs and villages had none. Besides encouraging rampant smuggling, the low gasoline price (7 cents per gallon) cuts the cost of running the ubiquitous generators that have made the electricity situation much better than that suggested by data on central power plant output (for \$90, Iraqis can buy a quiet, 1,200-watt generator capable of running a television and numerous lights).

Conclusion

Life in post-Saddam Iraq is neither chaotic nor a disaster; rather, it is a mixture of pluses and minuses. The polling data suggests that Iraqis are, on balance, optimistic. So long as that remains the case, the United States has reasonably hopeful conditions for the difficult task of transferring power to a new Iraqi-run government. Moreover, both the Zogby and Gallup polls suggest that Shi'is are much more aligned with the U.S. position than are Sunni Arabs. Shi'is and Kurds -- who were not well represented in either poll -- together constitute at least 75% of the population. So long as they remain sympathetic to U.S. goals, it will be difficult for resistance elements to become active in most of the country.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute.

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