



Opinion

Two Iraq War Narratives

By Lisa Schirch

Americans and Iraqis tell two different stories about the war in Iraq. Most Iraqis say that the United States-led invasion and occupation have fueled violence. The dominant American story is that US forces are curbing sectarian violence and making things better in Iraq. This gap in perception severely undermines public diplomacy efforts throughout the Muslim world, necessitating a much greater effort toward understanding the Iraqi point of view.

Recently, I was sitting tea with a group of Iraqi community development workers in Amman, Jordan. The conversation shifted from a focus on their attempts to reconcile Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish leaders in villages across Iraq to the larger question of how to reconcile US and Iraqi narratives about the war.

“Do Americans know they have made the situation worse?”

Do they know there was no Al-Qaeda here before the war, but now our cities are full of terrorists?”

>>US Abdication

The dominant Iraqi version of the conflict (though of course not the only one) goes something like this:

“While some of us wanted the United States to help overthrow Saddam Hussein, most of us think the Americans have stayed too long.

The US presence in Iraq fuels sectarian violence and has been a magnet for Al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters.

Iraqis feel humiliated by the occupation and believe the US continues to stay in Iraq to justify building permanent military bases and to ensure access to Iraqi oil for American corporations.

We want the US to announce a timetable for its departure. Violence will decrease when the Americans leave.”

Iraqis name the indignity of the occupation as the major reason why they want the US to leave their country. Many Iraqis believe that American interests in both Iraqi oil and the establishment of permanent military bases in Iraq sway, if not control, Iraqi politics. They point out the irony that those wanting a “soft partition” of Iraq are unlikely allies; as such, a partition would allow greater influence by the United States, and Al-Qaeda, and corporate oil interests.

Most Iraqis themselves, on the other hand, prefer a strong central government that controls its own oil.

This Iraqi narrative is confirmed by polling data. A recent ABC-BBC poll showed that over 70 percent of Iraqis wanted the US to leave Iraq.

Most believed the US troop “surge” had increased rather than decreased violence in Iraq. Earlier polls by World Public Opinion showed that while nearly half of the Iraqi population supported attacks on US troops, only 1 percent agreed with attacks on civilians across sectarian lines.

>>US Responsibility

In the US, the dominant narrative is quite different. It goes something like this: “While some of us believe we should not have gone to war in the first place, many now believe the US has some responsibility to prevent the sectarian violence that we believe threatens to pull Iraq apart.

American leaders across the political spectrum believe the US should stay in Iraq until security improves. The American public generally agrees that a vibrant democracy in Iraq is central to US interests in the war on terror.”

Within this narrative, many Americans see two choices: a long-term US military presence, or a US withdrawal leading to sectarian warfare. But there is a third option for responsible US engagement in Iraq. The US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, cautioned more than a year ago that “there is no military solution [in the country], the solution is economic and political.” If the US presence is indeed fueling rather than curbing violence in Iraq, it is time to go a step further: withdrawing US troops, supporting international peacekeeping forces, initiating robust regional diplomacy, and investing in reconstruction and humanitarian aid for the nearly 5 million displaced Iraqis.

This plan would more accurately respond to the true democratic wishes of the Iraqi people.

It is time Americans engage Iraqis more directly in dialogue to build a bridge between these two very different stories. Our policy discussions of “what to do about Iraq” need to include Iraqi civil society, government or religious leaders—and seriously consider polling data and Iraqi elections as signals of Iraqis’ desire to have US military forces leave their country.

Daily Star

Qatar ‘Surprised’ at Rift With Ethiopia

Qatar said on Wednesday it was surprised by Ethiopia’s decision to cut diplomatic ties with the Persian Gulf state, and rejected as unfounded the accusation that it sought to destabilize the Horn of Africa, AFP reported.

The official QNA news agency cited a Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying that Doha was “surprised” by Addis Ababa’s “unfounded and untruthful allegations,” and saw them as “a deliberate attempt to justify its own erroneous policies.”

On Monday, Ethiopia announced it was severing ties with Qatar, accusing Doha of supporting armed opposition groups across the Horn of Africa and citing Qatar’s “strong ties” with Ethiopia’s arch foe Eritrea.

QNA quoted the spokesman as calling on Ethiopia “to refrain from implicating Qatar in regional differences,” and added that “the Ethiopian government made similar allegations in the past—charges to which Qatar preferred not to respond in the hope that such erroneous behavior might cease.”

On Monday, the Addis Ababa government said in a statement that it had “displayed considerable patience towards Qatar’s attempts to destabilize our sub-region and, in particular, its hostile behavior towards Ethiopia.”

Deadly Afghan Blasts Claim 13 Lives

A spate of suicide bombings and other attacks on Afghan security forces Wednesday left 13 people dead and 24 others wounded, officials said.

In southern Kandahar province, a suicide bomber blew himself up next to a vehicle carrying intelligence agents in the border town of Spin Boldak, killing three civilians, Kandahar Gov. Assadullah Khalid said.

Two children and three intelligence agents were among the 14 hurt, AP quoted Khalid as saying.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi said the insurgent group was behind the attack and identified the bomber as a man named Gul Mohammad.

Meanwhile, a 16-year-old boy who was wounded in the explosion said police opened fire at the suspected suicide bomber before he detonated explosives.

Police opened fire at the man after he ran toward a group of civilians. He then threw his shawl and then there was a big explosion, said Rehmat Ullah.

He said the bomber was a man who appeared to be in his mid-20s.

In neighboring Helmand province, another suicide bomber targeted a convoy carrying the Gereshk district police chief, killing two officers and wounding three, district police chief Khairudin Shuhja said.

Sadr City
In Turmoil, Misery

➤ An Iraqi woman gestures in front of a house destroyed during a US airstrike on Baghdad’s Sadr City on April 21.

Parents are afraid to send their children to school. Once-thriving markets are nearly empty as residents fear being caught up in gunbattles and airstrikes or face intimidation by gunmen who rule the streets.

Sadr City in the capital Baghdad is home to the Mahdi Army of cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.

But it’s also home to 2.5 million people—nearly half of Baghdad’s 6 million population. Tens of thousands more live in neighborhoods around Sadr City’s grid-pattern streets, carved out in the 1950s for workers coming from the provinces.

The current showdown between the Mahdi Army and the government under the support of American forces has turned Sadr City into a raw narrative for both sides: Each needs control of the district as the linchpin for the capital.

This means that—for the moment—a huge segment of Baghdad is effectively held captive

to the violence. And US soldiers are worsening the situation by bombarding civilians in the Sadr City and setting up a barrier around it.

Many civilians stay holed up at home, venturing out only to go to work or stock up on supplies. With vehicle traffic limited, many of those who work in other parts of the capital have to walk to bus stops beyond the US and Iraqi checkpoints that control access into the embattled area.

“Life outside Sadr City is normal but not inside Sadr City where we see daily clashes and aerial shelling [by US forces],” said Sabah Mohammed Jassim, a 43-year-old father of four who has lived in an eastern section of the district for nearly 25 years, AP reported.

At least 315 people have been killed since the clashes began, although no breakdown was available for the number of Mahdi Army fighters, civilians and Iraqi security forces, according to an Interior Ministry official, speaking

on condition of anonymity because he wasn’t authorized to release the information.

The fighting, which began late last month, has jeopardized recent security gains and put a severe strain on a nearly 8-month-old ceasefire called by Al-Sadr.

Sadr City contains the largest concentration of Shiites in Iraq—most living in cramped houses that are packed along narrow alleyways.

This comes as Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki made an urgent appeal on Tuesday in Kuwait for greater international support to Iraq, and he voiced frustration with fellow leaders of Arab nations for failing to send ambassadors and relieve Iraq’s debts.

“It is hard for us to understand why our Arab brothers do not exchange diplomats with Iraq,” Al-Maliki said, adding other countries have kept their diplomatic missions in Baghdad, and have not given security as an excuse.