Iraq after the occupation

Iraqis speak about the state of their country as the US military withdraws

Abstract

This report was written after a number of interviews with Iraqis about how they see the future for their country as the US withdraws. Their diverse expressed opinions show that the truth is much more complex than the US narrative seeks to present. The contribution of the "surge" to a reduction in violence in Iraq is questionable. Opinions on the reliability of the Iraqi security forces, although not entirely negative, vary widely. Iraq faces a highly uncertain future, perhaps becoming a success story, but perhaps experiencing more bloodshed. The US should think creatively about ways to support the people of Iraq as they rebuild their country.

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

As the US Military prepares to leave Iraq, it has been selling a distinct narrative that can be summed up roughly as follows:

> Since 2007, security and stability in Iraq have steadily increased, mostly due to the surge – the deployment of US military reinforcements numbering some 20,000 soldiers – and the steady buildup of the Iraqi security forces. Those security forces, although not quite strong enough yet to maintain security and defend national borders, have been making great strides forward, and by the time the US Military leaves Iraq entirely by the end of 2011, national forces will be capable of maintaining security reliably and independently. The democratic process is catching on, with the elections in March 2010 being the fairest, freest elections in the Arab world. The United States is winning the war on terror in Iraq, and is leaving behind a relatively free, stable and independent Iraq.

Even without talking to a single Iraqi, it is clear there are some facts that shed doubt on some of these claims. Certainly, the elections of March were relatively successful, and despite all sorts of tricks by Prime Minister Maliki to ensure his victory, his block did not come out as the winner. But democracy is more than elections, and since March the country has seen a rise in political murders[1], foreign attempts to manipulate the political process and, quite simply, a failure of parties to form a government.

Since the beginning of 2010, the steady reduction in violence has leveled out, and the number of Iraqi civilians killed has actually risen substantially in July, with twice as many civilians killed as in June, making it the worst month in two years[2]. US forces withdrew from the cities in 2009, but the Iraqi security forces are greatly dependent on American support[3], and the supposed end to US combat missions in Iraq, August 2010, appears to be mostly a semantic change.[4]

It is difficult to see clearly the direction Iraq is going at the moment. In fact, it might be impossible.

This report seeks to allow a number of Iraqi citizens, living under the effects of the US occupation and withdrawal, to speak to the above mentioned issues. Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) Iraq has approached a number of friends and partners from the time CPT worked in Baghdad (2002-2006), and invited them to answer a number of questions relating to the security situation, the military, Iraq's chances for peace, security and independence and their views on the future.

CPT Iraq conducted thirteen interviews, sometimes by telephone, sometimes physically,

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1   Timothy Williams and Zaid Thaker, "Killers Stalk Politicians as Iraq Seeks Government" (New York Times, June 30, 2010)
2   Hamza Hendawi, "July worst month in 2 years for Iraq, casting doubts on country's stability" (AP, August 2, 2010)
3   Lourdes Garcia-Navarro: "As U.S. Troops Depart, Some Iraqis Fear Their Own" (NPR, June 21, 2010)
4   Tim Arango, "'Stability' Missions in Iraq Won't Mean End of Fighting" (New York Times, July 2, 2010)

sometimes by e-mail, in English or in Arabic. The group of interviewees represents what can be seen as a broad cross-section of society, ranging from a Christian priest in the Kurdish area to Sunni journalists, a former member of Parliament and Shiite doctors and campaigners. Some respondents requested anonymity. Others suggested friends for participation, which has enriched the work.

Despite attempts to interview a broad group of Iraqis, it is important to stress that *this report does not claim to be a representative poll*. The sample is simply too small for that. In addition, although some participants live in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region, and others in the Shiite south, most respondents live in Baghdad. It has unfortunately not been possible to gather views from Kirkuk, Mosul or other areas on the emerging Kurdish-Arab fault line, which some say will be a flashpoint for future conflict in Iraq as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government in Baghdad seek to establish control over these disputed areas. As such, this matter receives very little attention in this report as few participants mentioned it. Perhaps that is significant in itself.

This report is organized by theme, rather than by individual, as this makes it more easy to see trends and differences between people's views. Although it has hopefully made the report more readable, it might sometimes confuse the internal coherence of an individual's views. Each quote has been annotated with a numbered reference to the interview transcript.

The theme of each chapter is introduced by a short context, citing basic facts and mapping the field. The reliance in these introductions on United States sources does not mean CPT Iraq sees these sources as superior to others. These sources were preferred for several reasons. First, they were more accessible to the authors. Second, they are typically more accessible and well-known to the reader. Third, they are generally what the above-mentioned US narrative has relied on, and as this is the narrative the report seeks to contrast with the reported views and experiences, it is most fitting that they be mentioned.

This report is not about the justice of the US invasion of Iraq, nor about US war crimes during the invasion and occupation. It is not about the repeated attacks by Iran and Turkey on the northeastern border areas of Iraq[5]. As noted, it generally omits concerns about the emerging Kurdish-Arab fault line, perhaps due to the geographic location of respondents. Nevertheless, all four of these topics are connected to the theme discussed in this report.

This report is about the views and experiences of the people interviewed. It is about their perspective on the present and future of the Iraq that the US military is currently in the process of leaving.

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5   For this subject, please see the CPT report "Where there is a promise, there is a tragedy - cross-border bombings and shellings of villages in the Kurdish region of Iraq by the nations of Turkey and Iran" (CPT, February 2010)

The reader will find that these views, although diverse and varied, show one thing clearly: As the US military seeks to wash its hands of Iraq, proclaiming victory and independence for the country it invaded in 2003, the truth is much more complex than the US narrative seeks to present. The contribution of the surge to a reduction in violence in Iraq is questionable. Opinions on the reliability of the Iraqi security forces, although not entirely negative, vary widely. Iraq faces an uncertain future, perhaps a success story of democracy, stability and reconciliation – but perhaps many more years of bloodshed, hatred and oppression.

The responsibility of the United States and its allies for this must not be ignored, as several respondents have clearly noted. However, CPT Iraq believes the United States cannot be solely held responsible for success or failure in Iraq. Many interviewees mentioned the responsibility of neighboring states, and of Iraqis themselves, ranging from top politicians to normal citizens. Much remains to be done that cannot be done by the United States, and will need to be shouldered by the Iraqi people.

The conclusion strays a little from a pure representation of participants' views, in order to think creatively about how foreign powers, including the US, can take their responsibility to support the people of Iraq in this struggle.

The authors hope this report can contribute to a renewal of conscientious and compassionate solidarity with the people of Iraq, as they approach an era of new uncertainties.

2. Security situation

Security and a sense of safety have increased in most of Iraq over the last few years. Statistics, such as those provided by the US Department of Defense, summarized in the Brookings *Iraq Index*[6], show a steady decline of Iraqi civilian casualties since the beginning of 2007, apparently leveling out at the beginning of 2010. Iraq Body Count[7] confirms this trend. The Iraq Index likewise quotes a decrease in "enemy-initiated attacks against the coalition and its partners, by week"[8], again leveling out in early 2010. "Multiple fatality bombings" show no clear decrease since early 2008, having however fallen markedly since late 2006[9].

Despite such figures, and the real improvements they indicate, it should not be concluded that Iraq is now "safe". Civilian casualties in Iraq were at 337 for the month of May and 204 for the month of June of 2010, according to the Interior Ministry of Iraq[10]. The Associated Press reported that in the month of July 2010, civilian deaths actually rose to 535, making it the bloodiest month since May 2008.[11]

The sense of improved security over the last years was confirmed by all respondents outside Iraqi Kurdistan, which in contrast has enjoyed a remarkable level of security throughout the war[12]. "I feel more secure now than I did in 2006," says Dr. Amira al-Baldawi from Baghdad[13]. "In 2006, the streets of Baghdad were empty by 7PM," writes Ali al-Mawlawi. "Now you will find bustling markets open until 11PM."[14]

"I lived in a […] 'hot' insurgent Sunni neighborhood," says one Baghdad resident who requested anonymity. "There's less tension [now]."[15]

Although the authors of the Iraq Index appear to attribute the improvements to the "surge", the deployment of large amounts of US military reinforcements to Baghdad in 2007, a significant portion of respondents point in the opposite direction, saying that the US *withdrawal* from cities in July 2009 has contributed to the improved security. They point out that fighting between insurgents and US forces inside the cities, invited by US presence, was a main cause of insecurity.

Adil al-Lami, Baghdad resident and former president of the electoral commission, said the

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6 Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston (June 30, 2010), *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq;* http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex, henceforth: IQI, pp. 3-4

7 http://www.iraqbodycount.org/

8 IQI, p. 5

9 IQI, p. 7

10 IQI, p. 5. The population of Iraq is estimated to be about 31 million.

11 Hamza Hendawi, "July worst month in 2 years for Iraq, casting doubts on country's stability" (AP, August 2, 2010) – Note that the interviews were conducted in July, before these figures became available.

12 Please take into account, as written in the introduction of this report, that nearly all respondents live in either the KRG or Baghdad.

13 Interview 004

14 Interview 008

15 Interview 001

improved security was "[d]ue to the withdrawal of foreign forces out of cities, this led to the reduction of military operations against them and thus reducing the rate of civilian casualties." [16]

"The [US] armed forces patrols [were] always in our area and near by," writes Anmar from Baghdad. "[T]hey were targeted by the oppositions [sic] and that caused a great unsecured zone and caused great damages to the families". He mentions sudden raids "at any time", causing "horror to families". Anmar mentions this created "a negative public image towards the [US] forces." [17]

"Most people felt that the state had some power," writes May al-Atraqchi. "[T]hey came to feel that their neighborhoods were under their control and not under the hand of occupation (as some call it)", adding that this had an effect on their behavior as well, "which became more reasonable." [18]

"The presence of US forces has benefited extremists," writes Dr. Amira al-Baldawi, leading to such things as "car bombs and explosive vests in popular markets and close to schools and residential communities. [The US military] withdrawal has reduced many of the issues mentioned above."[19]

This was not the only cause mentioned for increased security. Several respondents attributed this improvement to the increased effectiveness of the Iraqi military (see next chapter). Military counterinsurgency victories over Al-Qaeda were also seen as an important factor, as was, to a lesser extent, the defeat of the Jaish al-Mahdi, headed by Muqtada as-Sadr.

Another event that greatly contributed to an improved security situation, as mentioned by almost half of respondents, is the establishment of the *Sons of Iraq*, also described as the *Awakening* movement or, in Arabic, *Sahwa*. This term refers to a heterogenous collection of former Sunni insurgents who have chosen to ally themselves with – and receive payment from - US forces in Iraq, taking up arms against Al Qaeda and performing general law-and-order tasks.[20]

Only one respondent credited the US forces for the improved security, and in particular General Petraeus. "I know that CPT is not positive toward US forces, and neither am I actually," he said, "but... this guy has a ton of honesty, number one, and, second, he knows what he's doing." The Baghdad resident, who requested anonymity, stressed that Petraeus' pragmatic problem-solving approach contributed more than anything else to the improvement in security. This was also the

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16 Interview 003
17 Interview 007
18 Interview 006
19 Interview 004
20 See for example the somewhat pessimistic Gompert, Kelly and Watkins: *Security in Iraq – a Framework for Analyzing Emerging Threats as U.S. Forces Leave* (RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2010), p. 20 (note 20) This paper sees the existence, and central government mismanagement, of the Sons of Iraq as a threat to stability. None of the respondents have indicated a similar view.

only respondent to mention the surge, saying it "helped break down the Sunni-Shi'i violence."[21]

Overall, a picture emerges of various factors contributing to real and perceived increase in security. All respondents credit some sort of military action for their heightened sense of safety, including stronger Iraqi security forces, the defeat of Al-Qaeda, the Sons of Iraq program, and increased US military presence. Half of respondents, however, indicate that the main cause of their sense of increased security is the withdrawal of US forces from the cities. The decreased visibility of US forces in Iraqi streets, they say, has resulted in decreased military action in residential areas and heightened feelings that people are in control of their own country.

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21 Interview 001

3. The Iraqi Security Forces

Since the US withdrawal from cities and towns in 2009, the Iraqi security forces have taken over responsibility for security operations there, manning checkpoints and executing raids and searches. As the Iraqi forces continue to expand their responsibilities, and their numbers, it is clear that they will play a central role in future developments in Iraq.

Since the widely criticized disbanding of the Iraqi military in 2003, the United States military has trained and equipped the growing new Iraqi security forces, now numbering an estimated 675,000[22]. General Odierno, commander of US troops in Iraq, recently said that he is "extremely pleased with the performance of the Iraqi security forces"[23].

Lt. Gen. Barbero, commanding general for the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, says the Iraqi forces are expected in the near future to "transition from a counterinsurgency-focused force to building conventional defensive capabilities"[24], purchasing tanks and fighter-jets. They are still entirely dependent on the US for intelligence purposes[25] and, according to some, for material needs and equipment[26].

As the Iraqi army was allegedly implicated in murders committed by Shiite death squads in 2006-2007, a great concern remains whether or not the security forces will be independent enough to maintain security reliably and impartially[27]. Particularly the counter-terrorism force, which Barbero hails as "the best in the region", is seen by some as more threatening than the terrorists it is meant to fight.[28]

In light of these factors, it is significant that over half of respondents indicated that they trusted the Iraqi security forces to maintain security in an independent and reliable way. "I trust them – More than seventy-five per cent of the Iraqi forces are absolutely subordinate to the military organization, and not to the parties," writes one respondent, who requested anonymity[29].

Some qualified their trust, however, raising concerns of oppression, sectarianism and lack of decent equipment. "[W]ith oppression, with abuse of human rights, but they will achieve [security] a hundred per cent," says an anonymous Baghdad resident.[30] Saed al-Obiady writes that he trusts the forces "if their readiness is further developed, and if they can keep away from political influence on

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22 Associated Press: "Iraqi Forces Still Frail as US Troops Head Home" (July 26, 2010)

23 Department of Defense News Briefing with Gen. Odierno, July 21, 2010
24 Department of Defense News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Barbero, June 18, 2010
25 Associated Press: "Iraqi Forces Still Frail as US Troops Head Home" (July 26, 2010)
26 Lourdes Garcia-Navarro: "As U.S. Troops Depart, Some Iraqis Fear Their Own" (NPR, June 21, 2010)
27 Ibid.
28 Shane Bauer, "Iraq's New Death Squad" (The Nation, June 22, 2009)
29 Interview 011
30 Interview 001

their decisions."[31]

"I trust the Iraqi security forces to maintain security, but not completely or independently," writes Readh Mahdi al-Zubaydi from Wasit, mentioning that unqualified non-military political figures are given high ranks. He is also concerned about "the security apparatus' shortage of equipment and weapons."[32]

Amongst those who indicated they do not trust the Iraqi security services to provide security in an independent and reliable way, a similar spectrum emerges, ranging from an unqualified distrust to a more nuanced collection of concerns. Anmar from Baghdad answers the question if he trusts the Iraqi forces with an emphatic "no", adding that Iraq needs "a professional army and police and Intelligence [sic] experts, and not a gas cylinders sellers [sic] who are now generals."[33] The new Iraqi army, he says, "which is controlled by parties will act according to the instructions given by parties."

Rev. Sliwa Aziz Rsam, a priest from Kirkuk now living in Suleimaniya, in the KRG, says that trust in the security forces is "not possible now, because there is chaos." He says a sense of national interest is absent from the security forces,[34] "because the army also has connections to the parties". Mohammed Mahdi from Suleimaniya writes that he doesn't trust the security forces, because "we still don't have any independent security in Iraq. Even in the KRG, all those forces are under control of the parties and their leaders."[35] Although it is difficult to generalize with such small numbers, it is interesting that those participants living in the KRG, which is typically safe, express less trust in the Iraqi security forces – including the Kurdish Peshmerga forces – than those living in other parts of Iraq, which is typically much less secure.

In addition to the above mentioned lack of independence and bad equipment, Adil al-Lami cites a "[l]ack of educational aspects in the field of human rights and loyalty to the homeland and public Culture [sic] and low educational level to [sic] the soldiers"[36] as cause for his distrust. "If all foreign troops [are] withdrawing from Iraq before reasonable arming of the Iraqi army... it is difficult to achieve stability in Iraq in peace and security," he writes.

A Baghdad resident describes the Iraqi Army takeover of his neighborhood after the US withdrawal, saying that "on one side, that's good, we have Iraqi citizens that ... are more able to communicate… On the other hand, should someone get arrested … you usually now have to spend

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31 Interview 005
32 Interview 012
33 Interview 007
34 Interview 013
35 Interview 010
36 Interview 003

money to [secure] your release, even if you're innocent."[37]

      There is no semblance of consensus regarding the trustworthiness of the Iraqi forces. Although some respondents do indicate they trust them without qualification, and credit them for improved security, many cite concerns. This is not limited to the Iraqi Army and police forces, but extends to the Kurdish Peshmerga. Concerns include partiality to sects or parties, lack of skill and equipment and a questionable commitment to the rule of law or human rights.

37 Interview 001

4. Recommendations and expectations for the future – domestic

Since the March elections, political progress in Iraq has remained elusive as parties seek to form a coalition[38]. Former Prime Minister Ayyad Allawi, described by most of the press as a "secular shiite", and his mostly Sunni Iraqiya list, technically won the election, defeating prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and his mostly Shiite State of Law coalition by a narrow margin. However, either will still need support from both the Kurdish parties or the more religious Shiite list, the Iraqi National Alliance. This last one is an obvious partner for Maliki, but refuses to accept Maliki as candidate for Prime Minister – a position Maliki is not willing to give up. Maliki has worked hard to collect power around himself, while other parties would prefer to see a weaker Prime Minister.[39]

At the same time, the economy is in a bad state. Electricity supplies are nowhere near meeting demands.[40] In February 2009, only 50 per cent of the Iraqi population had access to twelve or more hours of electricity a day. Only 20 per cent had access to sanitation. As little as thirty per cent of the population had access to health services.[41] Iraq ranks 176th out of 180 on the Corruption Perception Index, a composite index of corruption levels that draws on different expert surveys.[42] And the specter of sectarian war still haunts the country – not least in the disputed areas between the Kurdish-controlled North and centrally-governed Iraq.[43]

Many respondents confirmed that large threats remain to Iraq's progress, freedom and stability that depend on internal factors. As long as corruption, sectarianism and the absence of a serious sense of united national interest persist, many said, Iraqi hopes remain unattainable. Some added concerns about democratic principles and various outstanding issues for which a resolution has been postponed indefinitely. Distrust of politicians is widespread. The sad state of the economy, and lack of services, were also seen as central problems. Matters relating to the Iraqi security forces will not be discussed in this chapter; see chapter 3, "The Iraqi Security Forces".

About two-thirds of respondents expressed their worries about internal divisions. "A greater impetus needs to be given to the revitalization of the Iraqi national spirit,"[44] writes Saed al-Obiady. "Everyone competes for power, competes for the top position," says Sliwa Aziz Rsam, "People need, before anything, to look at the interest of the country."[45] He, as do most others, call for a

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38 See for example Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Military Chief Presses Iraqis to End Political Deadlock", (New York Times, July 27, 2010)
39 See for example Anthony Shadid, "Maliki Says Iraq Needs Him as a Leader", (New York Times, June 9, 2010)
40 See for example Stephen Farrell's article "Electricity: Iraq's Other Power Vacuum" on the New York Times' "At War" Weblog (August 1, 2010): http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/electricity-iraqs-other-power-vacuum/
41 IQI p.33
42 IQI p.25 – a lower position means the country faces more corruption.
43 See for example International Crisis Group, "Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble along the Trigger Line – Middle East Paper no. 88" (July 8, 2009)
44 Interview 005
45 Interview 013

secular state. The various parties' desire to "build a state on religious principles like that – Shiite, Sunni, Christian, whatever – we can't have that," he says. "People need to look at humanity."

"The scenarios can be different," says one Baghdad resident. "depending […] on what type of government we will have soon. If the same Shi'i domination will happen, then we will have Sunni oppression and marginalization. […] The worst scenario is full-scale war between the Sunnis and Shi'is, and Iran and Saudi-Arabia intruding in the country."[46] The sectarian tension is there, under the surface, he says. He later sent CPT an e-mail saying he was "quite nervous criticizing the ruling Shi'i parties and Iran over the phone," worried that the phone would be tapped.

"The only available possibility," writes May al-Atraqchi, "is the assertion of the interests of the people and the country over individual interests, and this will not happen while the sectarian, nationalist and Baathist mindsets persist."[47] In an indication of the divisions that plague the country, Anmar from Baghdad states that overzealous de-Baathification has brought the chance of reconciliation "beyond any chance of bring[ing] it to life again."[48] He proceeds to suggest that the US "[r]esolve all parties, because our culture works perfectly under one ruler."

It is not just internal division that causes distrust of politicians and the political process. The absence of serious democratic values and widespread corruption contribute to this distrust. "They're not interested in the people or the responsibility for the people or anything for the people," says Saheb from Baghdad. "The important thing is that they have their position."[49]

"We need a body of laws that help support [the democratic] experience," writes Dr. Amira al-Baldawi, "like a law of parties, and the amendment of the election law, and the creation of a united supreme court..."[50] Without "enhancing the concepts of democracy based on the Constitution," writes Adil al-Lami, "it is difficult to achieve stability in Iraq in peace and security." He suggests, like Al-Baldawi, the amendment of the constitution and the electoral law, and to "[c]larify and define the powers of local governments and federal institutions." Iraq also needs to establish "the rights of the family, women, children and those with special needs," he writes, as well as "[e]mployment on the basis of competence, under the principle of equality of opportunity." He also calls for the separation of powers and an equitable distribution of wealth in Iraq.

Many participants mentioned corruption as a major problem, crippling state organizations and economic activity, as well as maintenance of security. "This country is soaking in corruption," says a Baghdad resident. "We cannot function at all... I worked in an electronics company; we used

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46 Interview 001
47 Interview 006
48 Interview 007
49 Interview 002
50 Interview 004

to do lots of work before the war. Now, the corruption has disabled us totally."[51] "The spread of corruption is one of the daily occurrences in all state institutions," writes Al-Baldawi, "and this is what deserves our effort of change, and should be amongst the first points on our agenda."[52]

Many respondents mentioned the need for revival of the economy and basic services. May al-Atraqchi suggests "[o]pening Iraq to foreign investment, which will contribute to the reduction of the problem of unemployment, and the strengthening of the economy and the advancement of the country."[53] One anonymous respondent agrees with this, but adds: "The obscene opulence of some – and especially those on the payroll of political interests – is excessive, while the rate of wretched poverty in Iraq continues to pose a humanitarian problem."[54]

"Iraq has not known stability since the modern Iraqi state was created," writes Dr. Amira al-Baldawi, "and the reason for this was that the state's resources and its power were not divided equally."[55]

Most participants confirm the abominable state of public services. The lack of accessible healthcare, sanitation and sewage, and, most of all, electricity are crippling the country, they say.

"The temperature in Iraq is over fifty degrees," says an electrical engineer from Baghdad. "So people need air-conditioning, especially sick people."[56] But the problem goes beyond comfort. "I've spoken to farmers, who tell me they don't plant their lands, because they don't have electricity... to get the water to their land." The revenue from the crops does not buy enough fuel for a diesel-run water pump, so their fields are left fallow. "This applies to most Iraqi businesses," he says. "Seriously, I blame everybody within authority since 2003 until now, for not restoring the electricity. It's a true tragedy."

An array of other issues is mentioned. Considering the importance some US studies give to the emerging fault line between the KRG and centrally-administered Iraq, it is interesting only one respondent mentions this.[57] The position of women is mentioned more often, as is the matter of minority rights. The educational system in Iraq is mentioned several times as an issue of concern, as is the presence of the remnants of Al-Qaeda.

It is important to stress that many of the above matters are linked to outside interference, which is the topic of the next chapter. Many respondents say the sectarianism that plagues Iraq is intimately connected to many parties' connections to neighboring foreign powers, or US influence,

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51 Interview 001
52 Interview 004
53 Interview 006
54 Interview 011
55 Interview 004
56 Interview 001
57 As noted in the Introduction, none of the participants lives in the disputed areas.

or both.

Many respondents stress, however, that all these matters can be resolved by Iraqis themselves. "If everyone works a little bit according to their conscience," says Sliwa Aziz Rsam, "these things wouldn't be happening and there would be stability. It depends on the people. Just the government alone can't do anything."[58] Others are more pessimistic about the Iraqi people's chances to improve their own situation. Mohammed Mahdi writes that for Iraq to become a stable, peaceful and just country, "a miracle needs to happen."[59]

Considering the above, the state of affairs appears grim. Distrust of politicians is high, although much depends on them. Corruption, sectarianism and a lack of democratic values are causes of great concern. At the same time, the economy, particularly in centrally-governed Iraq, is in dire straits; public services are almost non-existent. However, most respondents agree on these basic tenets: the interest of the country should come first, and fighting corruption, reviving the economy, and providing public services should have priority. Nevertheless, who can best represent the "interests of the country" remains a topic of disagreement, and, particularly in light of the current failure of government formation, maintaining optimism will be a challenge.

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58 Interview 013
59 Interview 010

5. Recommendations and expectations for the future – foreign

In addition to US designs to hang on to power and influence after its military withdrawal, the weakness of the Iraqi state invites neighboring countries to try to exert their influence, or prevent their rivals from doing so. Many countries are opening consulates and are seeking to craft their favored coalitions from the various Iraqi political parties.[60] The United States is setting up a large State Department presence, boasting the largest embassy in the world with a significant amount of armed personnel and equipment for its defense.[61]

One country, though not the only one, often named for interference in Iraq is the Islamic Republic of Iran. It certainly has an interest in creating an Iraq that is friendly, or, at least, not a threat, considering the devastating Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's. Iran, the largest Shiite country in the world, might be seek to control its smaller neighbor, if the Islamic Republic manages to exploit a sense of religious loyalty among Iraq's Shiite majority[62].

This seems plausible enough, particularly considering the sudden departure for Iran of nearly all Iraqi political party leaders shortly after the 2010 election, supposedly to celebrate Nowruz (new year).[63] Joost Hiltermann,[64] of International Crisis Group, points out that Iran has actually been fairly ineffective at its efforts to control the political process. It has, for example, failed at its attempts in the past months to forge a political alliance between Maliki's State of Law coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance. Hiltermann argues that Iranian attempts at interference – through, for example, an offer to renovate the historic city center of Karbala – have in fact caused a backlash of nationalist sentiments.

Other countries have also sought to exert their influence, most notably through the establishment of consulates, trade deals or political engineering. Most significantly, Syria recently hosted a meeting between the elusive Muqtada as-Sadr, a radical Shiite cleric whose party is a member of the Iraqi National Alliance, and Ayyad Allawi. Both politicians praised each other's willingness to compromise – remarks obviously directed at Maliki.[65] But it is not only such overt and relatively benign actions Iraq's neighbors are undertaking. Accusations of support for terrorist groups within Iraq, political fraud and covert actions are equally common.

A pattern in the participants' testimonies confirms the above. Many if not all respondents expressed concerns over foreign interference in their country in one way or another and stress that

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60 See for example Joost Hiltermann, "Iraq: The Impasse" (New York Review of Books, August 19, 2010)
61 See for example Warren P. Strobel, "State Dept. Planning to Field a Small Army in Iraq" (McClatchy, July 21, 2010)
62 See for example Gordon Lubold, "As US withdrawal nears, Iraqi fear of Iran grows" (Christian Science Monitor, December 20, 2009)
63 Rod Norland, "After Iraq Vote, Tehran Seeks to Weigh In", (New York Times, April 1, 2010)
64 Hiltermann 2010
65 Steven Lee Myers, "Moktada al-Sadr Urges New Iraq Government" (New York Times, July 19, 2010)

Iraq should remain independent. The countries they mentioned as particularly threatening, and those they chose to tolerate, however, show significant differences in direction, without which the previous chapters cannot be understood.

Several respondents maintained a somewhat fatalistic approach to Iraqi independence. "Iraq lost independence in 1980, and never gained it back,"[66] says one Baghdad resident. "But hey, I mean seriously, independence, which I like very much [...] is not the [highest] priority in my mind at the moment." May al-Atraqchi says that by regional standards, Iraq is already independent. "If American forces would stay on their military bases in Iraq, or would work beneath the cover of corporations or another alias, the situation would not be different from the countries that surround us – so what's the problem?"[67]

Others were less accepting about the matter. "I pray to God that the Arabic and neighboring countries will lift their hands off the people of Iraq,"[68] says Saheb from Baghdad. "Leave the Iraqi people to solve their own problems." "Iraq will be formally independent after the [US] withdrawal, but effectively only through the willpower of a free Iraq,"[69] says an anonymous respondent.

"All depends on the shape of the new government,"[70] writes Ali al-Mawlawi. "An inclusive government that maintains the full authority of an independent Prime Minister may limit the influence of the US and regional powers."

Several participants mentioned the unresolved issue of "Chapter Seven" - the fact that Iraqi international assets are frozen under Chapter VII of the UN charter. This is to facilitate the paying of reparations to Kuwait for Saddam Hussein's invasion of that country twenty years ago.[71] "Iraq's removal from Chapter 7 status is key to the country's future stability and prosperity,"[72] writes Ali al-Mawlawi.

About a third of respondents explicitly – and passionately – expressed caution about Iran. "I think Iraq will not be independent after withdrawal of [the] US, because Iran and Iraq's neighbors will never let Iraq have any government without their influence,"[73] writes Mohammed Mahdi from Suleimaniya. "Iranian interference is the biggest threatening factor,"[74] writes Saed al-Obiady, "and in its current situation, Iraq does not have the strength to deter this interference without foreign help."

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66 Interview 001
67 Interview 006
68 Interview 002
69 Interview 011
70 Interview 008
71 See for example Louis Charbonneau, "Iraq asks UN to cut reparations to Kuwait, others" (Reuters, June 18, 2009)
72 Interview 008
73 Interview 010
74 Interview 005

"[The Iranians] have a great impact and all Iraqi officials fear their authorities,"[75] writes one respondent, saying that they typically turn a blind eye to Iranian operations in Iraq out of fear of what might happen to them. He tells the story of a weapons smuggling action across the Shat al-Arab waterway, bringing caches of weapons from Iran to Iraq. The Iraqi army foiled the action, but when asked who ran the smuggling, a spokesperson from the provincial council claimed it was the Baathists and the Sunni fundamentalist insurgents.

"It is true that the Iraqi army confronted the smugglers and stopped them," he writes, "but did army or otherwise investigations reveal the Iranian connection? Or any other Iraqi official statement?"

All respondents who singled out Iran were, sometimes grudgingly, opposed to a hasty end to US presence in Iraq – a presence they see as necessary to keep the Iranians out the door. "If the Americans leave and the Iranians take over the country, again we don't have independence," writes one respondent. "Iran and the nest which has been opened by [the] US in Iraq will leave Iraq in a total [chaos] for a long time. If [the US] want to withdraw … they should clean their mess first,"[76] writes Anmar.

A slight majority of respondents expressed such reservations of US plans to leave, not only for reasons of other foreign interference, but also for the sake of internal security. "No country likes to be occupied,"[77] admits Sliwa Aziz Rsam. "But the situation of Iraq is a very specific situation... the Iraqis need the Americans to stabilize the situation."

"I think the matter will get worse with the final withdrawal of the American forces," writes May al-Atraqchi. "The presence of the American forces behind the scenes gives [the Iraqi security forces] influence in the street a sense of strength."[78]

"[A] total US forces withdrawal might have [as its result] disorder on the streets (assassinations for political personnel),"[79] writes Az.A.G, adding that currently "people in power are afraid of the US troops."

"I recommend that some of the US forces stay in Iraq under the title of supporting training, supervising," he writes, adding that they should at the same time "pick key personnel in the Iraqi army and put their trust in them in order to push back any kind of threat that legal Iraqi government might face in the few next years."[80]

About a third of respondents, however, are optimistic about the future of Iraq after the

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75 E-mail correspondence
76 Interview 007
77 Interview 013
78 Interview 006
79 Interview 009
80 Interview 009

proposed withdrawal. "After the withdrawal of American troops, I foresee an improvement in security,"[81] writes Dr. Amira al-Baldawi, "because security was established through Iraqi willpower."

"I think security will be established and consolidated more and more after the withdrawal of US forces," writes Readh Mahdi al-Zubaydi, "because their presence on Iraqi soil will provoke the fears of neighboring states like Iran and Syria, and this leads to continued support for armed groups."[82] He writes that in order for Iraq to become a stable, peaceful and just country, it needs "[t]he entire and complete withdrawal of foreign forces, and the ending of regional interference and regional influence by neighboring countries, whether Iran or the Arabic countries..."[83]

"It is difficult to predict what will happen over the coming year," writes Ali al-Mawlawi. He adds that "[t]he US and Iraq's neighbors need to play a constructive role in Iraq, without interfering in the country's internal affairs. It is Iraqis who must find solutions to their country's problems and they should not be bullied into choosing options that are not in the country's interests." [84]

It should be noted that none of the respondents expected the US military withdrawal to bring an end to US power or presence in Iraq. "They will keep the decision-making," said one respondent. "I don't think the American army came all this way, spent all this money, then to [...] leave [Iraq] a prey to others. And I don't think they would like to see Iraq stray into a Shi'i religious state."[85]

Although nearly all respondents profess their desire for an independent Iraq, there is disagreement about what this means. Where some want an end to *all* foreign interference – including an American military presence – others see such a presence as the only thing that can save Iraq from other – notably, but not exclusively, Iranian – interference. A picture of uncertainty regarding the near future emerges. Some expect the American withdrawal will bring more stability and independence, while others expect the withdrawal to make security in Iraq, and the country's chances for a semblance of independence, much more precarious.

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81 Interview 004
82 Interview 012
83 Interview 012
84 Interview 008
85 Interview 001

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the above testimony that the US version of recent Iraqi history, and its near future, must be qualified to an extent. Although all respondents in formerly US-occupied areas say they feel safer now than they did four years ago, most attribute this not to the US "surge" but to the withdrawal of US forces from the cities, the Sons of Iraq program, or to the increased capacity of the Iraqi security forces. Some respondents trust these forces enough to maintain security independently and reliably in the future, but most have concerns about their trustworthiness or the quality of their training or equipment.

While the US praises the elections of March 2010, most participants distrust their politicians. The economy is in very bad shape and public services are almost non-existent. Sectarian and ethnic tensions have not disappeared. The US professes to leave behind a functioning and independent country, but although some expect things to get better after a US withdrawal, others fear foreign intervention and recommend the US forces stay. Nobody expects Iraq to be independent of US influence after the withdrawal.

It appears that Iraq is divided, confused and uncertain about the future. However, from a broader perspective, there are vague agreements. These could become a starting point for a process of reconciliation.

Most participants agree that the US withdrawal from the cities was a good idea. Most agree that the Iraqi security forces deserve more attention, in the form of training and equipment. Most distrust their politicians. Most agree that Iraqi national interests should come first for its citizens – before the interests of sect or party – and that the economy and public services must urgently be revived. Most agree that Iraq should be united and sovereign, resisting foreign interference.

Most participants also agree that these things can only be attained through the willpower of the people of Iraq. They note that Iraqis need to take initiative to resist outside meddling in their affairs, to withstand sectarianism and fight corruption.

As was noted in the introduction, the United States and its allies bear some responsibility, not only for the current state of Iraq, but also for its condition in the next few decades. Nevertheless, other forces have contributed to the bloodshed, division and destruction in Iraq, and it would be incorrect and unfair to blame the United States alone. Some of those other forces, like regional powers and political figures, can and should be held similarly responsible. Others, such as Al-Qaeda, are more elusive.

Just as the United States did not bring about Iraq's problems solely by its invasion, it cannot contribute to a lasting solution merely by disengaging. The US and regional powers, and all others who have contributed to Iraq's problems, should accept their responsibility and seek non-military

ways to support the Iraqi people in their efforts to rebuild their country, and their nation. All of the following suggestions are predicated on Iraqi democratic sovereignty.

One suggestion is that the US, in its last days in Iraq, could seek to support the reconstruction of public services and the economy. It is imperative to avoid attaching the usual strings – liberalization of the economy, privatization of services, contracting US companies – to such an effort. Neighboring countries could be involved in this to make it a regional effort. An effort to fight corruption could be part of this, and, if successful, would greatly benefit the Iraqi economy.

Another plan could be a program of reconciliation among Iraqis. The US could, in cooperation with regional powers and especially Iran, seek out and support reconciliation efforts seeking to defuse sectarian and/or ethnic tension on the lowest level. Schools, universities or trade unions would be an obvious place to start. One can also imagine a program of reconciliation in historically mixed areas of Baghdad, which have been ethnically "cleansed" in the past seven years. Cooperation with Iran would obviously be a contentious issue, but, considering existing tensions, it might yield great fruits in the future, not only for Iraq – which must live next to Iran – but also for regional and global relations.

Finally, perhaps more attainable, the US and regional powers could invest in human rights education for the Iraqi military and police forces, seeking to create a military and police culture that is accountable and embraces its responsibility to the Iraqi people instead of its power over them. The authors do not believe, however, that the United States or regional powers are good places to find expertise on these affairs.

Even if the above suggestions are somewhat visionary and unlikely to be enacted, CPT Iraq believes they can be a starting place for the United States to think creatively about ways to support the people of Iraq as they seek to rebuild their country. The economy, public services, reconciliation and a military culture of accountability should be central priorities for the United States in its waning days in Iraq.

CPT Iraq believes the United States and regional powers have a constructive role to play in Iraq, although they bear responsibility for much of the bloodshed that Iraq has suffered since the US invasion. Any constructive role must be non-military and based on Iraqi sovereignty.

Although this report indicates some points where the US success story in Iraq appears to be false, and although the future is uncertain, CPT Iraq does not believe the situation in Iraq is hopeless. Much will depend on the choices made in the near future.