

# “Iraq doesn’t exist anymore”

an interview with Nir Rosen

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Global Research, December 05, 2007

[Online Journal](#) 5 December 2007

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Nir Rosen is a fellow at the New America Foundation who has written extensively on American policy in Afghanistan and Iraq. He spent more than two years in Iraq reporting on the American occupation, the relationship between Americans and Iraqis, the development of postwar Iraqi religious and political movements, interethnic and sectarian relations, and the Iraqi civil war. His reporting and research also focused on the origins and development of Islamist resistance, insurgency, and terrorist organizations. He has also reported from Somalia, where he investigated Islamist movements; Jordan, where he investigated the origins and future of the Zargawi movement; and Pakistan, where he investigated the madrassas and pro-Taliban movements.

**Question:** Is the “surge” working as Bush claims or is the sudden lull in the violence due to other factors like demographic changes in Baghdad?

**Nir Rosen:** I think that even calling it a surge is misleading. A surge is fast; this took months. It was more like an ooze. The US barely increased the troop numbers. It mostly just forced beleaguered American soldiers to stay longer. At the same time, the US doubled their enemies because, now, they’re not just fighting the Sunni militias but the Shiite Mahdi army also.

No, I don’t think the surge worked. Objectively speaking, the violence is down in Baghdad, but that’s mainly due to the failure of the US to establish security. That’s not success.

Sure, less people are being killed but that’s because there are less people to kill.

The violence in Iraq was not senseless or crazy, it was logical and teleological. Shiite militias were trying to remove Sunnis from Baghdad and other parts of the country, while Sunni militias were trying to remove Shiites, Kurds and Christians from their areas. This has been a great success. So you have millions of refugees and millions more internally displaced, not to mention hundreds of thousands dead. There are just less people to kill.

Moreover, the militias have consolidated their control over some areas. The US never thought that Muqtada al Sadr would order his Mahdi Army to halt operations (against Sunnis, rival Shiites and Americans) so that he could put his house in order and remove unruly militiamen. And, the US never expected that Sunnis would see that they were losing the civil war so they might as well work with the Americans to prepare for the next battle.

More importantly, violence fluctuates during a civil war, so people try to maintain as much normalcy in their lives as possible. It’s the same in Sarajevo, Beirut or Baghdad — people marry, party, go to school when they can — and hide at home or fight when they must.

The euphoria we see in the American media reminds me of the other so-called milestones that came and went while the overall trend in Iraq stayed the same. Now Iraq doesn't exist anymore. That's the most important thing to remember. There is no Iraq. There is no Iraqi government and none of the underlying causes for the violence have been addressed, such as the mutually exclusive aspirations of the rival factions and communities in Iraq.

**Question:** Are we likely to see a "Phase 2" in the Iraq war? In other words, will we see the Shia eventually turn their guns on US occupation forces once they're confident that the Ba'athist-led resistance has been defeated and has no chance of regaining power?

**Nir Rosen:** Shiite militias have been fighting the Americans on and off since 2004 but there's been a steady increase in the past couple of years. That's not just because the Americans saw the Mahdi army as one of the main obstacles to fulfilling their objectives in Iraq, but also because Iraq's Shiites — especially the Mahdi army — are very skeptical of US motives. They view the Americans as the main obstacle to achieving their goals in Iraq. Ever since Zalmay Khalilzad took over as ambassador; Iraq's Shiites have worried that the Americans would turn on them and throw their support behind the Sunnis. That's easy to understand given that Khalilzad's mandate was to get the Sunnis on board for the constitutional referendum. (Khalilzad is also a Sunni himself)

But, yes, to answer your question; we could see a "Phase 2" if the Americans try to stay in Iraq longer or, of course, if the US attacks Iran. Then you'll see more Shiite attacks on the Americans.

**Question:** Hundreds of Iraqi scientists, professors, intellectuals and other professionals have been killed during the war. Also, there seems to have been a plan to target Iraq's cultural icons — museums, monuments, mosques, palaces etc. Do you think that there was a deliberate effort to destroy the symbols of Iraqi identity — to wipe the slate clean — so that the society could be rebuilt according to a neoliberal, "free market" model?

**Nir Rosen:** There certainly was no plan on the part of the occupying forces. In fact, that's the main reason that things have gone so horribly wrong in Iraq; there was no plan for anything; good or bad.

The looting was not "deliberate" American policy. It was simply incompetence. The destruction of Iraq's cultural icons was incompetence, also — as well as stupidity, ignorance and criminal neglect.

I don't believe that there was really any deliberate malice in the American policy; regardless of the malice with which it may have been implemented by the troops on the ground. The destruction of much of Iraq was the result of Islamic and sectarian militias — both Sunni and Shiite — seeking to wipe out hated symbols. The Americans didn't know enough about Iraq to intentionally execute such a plan even if it did exist. And, I don't think it did.

**Question:** The media rarely mentions the 4 million refugees created by the Iraq war. What do you think the long-term effects of this humanitarian crisis will be?

**Nir Rosen:** Well, the smartest Iraqis — the best educated, the professionals, the middle and upper classes — have all left or been killed. So the society is destroyed. So there is no hope for a non-sectarian Iraq now.

The refugees are getting poorer and more embittered. Their children cannot get an

education and their resources are limited. Look at the Palestinian refugee crisis. In 1948 you had about 800,000 Palestinians expelled from their homes and driven into Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East. Over time, they were politicized, mobilized and militarized. The militias they formed to liberate their homeland were manipulated by the governments in the region and they became embroiled in regional conflicts, internal conflicts and, tragically, conflicts with each other. They were massacred in Lebanon and Jordan. And, contributed to instability in those countries.

Now you have camps in Lebanon producing jihadists who go to fight in Iraq or who fight the Lebanese Army. And this is all from a population of just 800,000 mostly rural, religiously-homogeneous (Sunni) refugees.

Now, you have 2 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, a million in Jordan and many more in other parts of the Middle East. The Sunnis and Shiites already have ties to the militias. They are often better educated, urban, and have accumulated some material wealth. These refugees are increasingly sectarian and are presently living in countries with a delicate sectarian balance and very fragile regimes. Many of the refugees will probably link up with Islamic groups and threaten the regimes of Syria and Jordan. They're also likely to exacerbate sectarian tensions in Lebanon.

They're also bound to face greater persecution as they "wear out their welcome" and put a strain on the country's resources.

They'll probably form into militias and either try go home or attempt to overthrow the regimes in the region. Borders will change and governments will fall. A new generation of fighters will emerge and there'll be more attacks on Americans.

**Question:** You have compared Iraq to Mogadishu. Could you elaborate?

**Nir Rosen:** Somalia hasn't had a government since 1991. I've been to Mogadishu twice. Its ruled by warlords who control their own fiefdoms. Those who have money can live reasonably well. That's what it's like in Iraq now — a bunch of independent city-states ruled by various militias — including the American militia and British militias.

Of course, Somalia is not very important beyond the Horn of Africa. It's bordered by the sea, Kenya and Ethiopia. There's no chance of the fighting in Somalia spreading into a regional war. Iraq is much more dangerous in that respect.

**Question:** Is the immediate withdrawal of all US troops really the best option for Iraq?

**Nir Rosen:** It really doesn't matter whether the Americans stay or leave. There are no good options for Iraq; no solutions. The best we can hope for is that the conflict won't spread. The best thing we can say about the American occupation is that it may soften the transition for the ultimate break up of Iraq into smaller fragments. A couple of years ago, I said that the Americans should leave to prevent a civil war and to allow the (Sunni) rejectionists to join the government once the occupation ended. Turns out, I was right; but, obviously, it's too late now. The civil war has already been fought and won in many places, mainly by the Shiite militias.

The Americans are still the occupying force, which means that they must continue to repress people that didn't want them there in the first place. But, then, if you were to ask a

Sunni in Baghdad today what would happen if the Americans picked up and left, he'd probably tell you that the remaining Sunnis would be massacred. So, there's no "right answer" to your question about immediate withdrawal.

**Question:** November was the third anniversary of the US siege of Falluja. Could you explain what happened in Falluja and what it means to Iraqis and the people in the Middle East?

**Nir Rosen:** Falluja was a poor industrial town known only for its kabob which Iraqis stopped to get on the way to picnic at lake Habbaniya. There were no attacks on the Americans from Falluja during the combat-phase of the US invasion. When Saddam's regime fell, the Fallujans began administering their own affairs until the Americans arrived. The US military leaders saw the Sunnis as the "bad guys," so they treated them harshly. At first, the Fallujans ignored the rough treatment because the tribal leaders wanted to give the Americans a chance.

Then there was a incident, in April 2003, where US troops fired on a peaceful demonstration and killed over a dozen unarmed civilians. This, more than anything else, radicalized the people and turned them against the Americans.

In the spring of 2004, four (Blackwater) American security contractors were killed in Falluja. Their bodies were burned and dismembered by an angry crowd. It was an insult to America's pride. In retaliation, the military launched a massive attack which destroyed much of the city and killed hundreds of civilians. The US justified the siege by saying that it was an attack on foreign fighters that (they claimed) were hiding out in terrorist strongholds. In truth, the townspeople were just fighting to defend their homes, their city, their country and their religion against a foreign occupier. Some Shiite militiamen actually fought with the Sunnis as a sign of solidarity.

In late 2004, the Americans completely destroyed Falluja forcing tens of thousands of Sunnis to seek refuge in western Baghdad. This is when the sectarian clashes between the Sunnis and Shiites actually began. The hostilities between the two groups escalated into civil war.

Falluja has now become a symbol throughout the Muslim world of the growing resistance to American oppression.

**Question:** The political turmoil in Lebanon continues even though the war with Israel has been over for more than a year. Tensions are escalating because of the upcoming presidential elections which are being closely monitored by France, Israel and the United States. Do you see Hezbollah's role in the political process as basically constructive or destructive? Is Hezbollah really a "terrorist organization" as the Bush administration claims or a legitimate resistance militia that is necessary for deterring future Israeli attacks?

**Nir Rosen:** Hizballah is not a terrorist organization. It is a widely popular and legitimate political and resistance movement. It has protected Lebanon's sovereignty and resisted American and Israeli plans for a New Middle East. It's also among the most democratic of Lebanon's political movements and one of the few groups with a message of social justice and anti imperialism. The Bush administration is telling its proxies in the Lebanese government not to compromise on the selection of the next president. This is pushing Lebanon towards another civil war, which appears to be the plan. The US also started civil wars in Iraq, Gaza and Somalia.

**Question:** The humanitarian situation in Somalia is steadily worsening. The UN reports that nearly 500,000 Somalis have fled Mogadishu and are living in makeshift tent cities with little food or water. The resistance — backed by the former government — the Islamic Courts Union, is gaining strength and fighting has broken out in 70 percent of the neighborhoods in Mogadishu. Why is the US backing the invading Ethiopian army? Is Somalia now facing another bloody decades-long war or is there hope that the warring parties can resolve their differences?

**Nir Rosen:** After a decade and a half without a government and the endless fighting of clan-based militias; clan leaders decided to establish the Islamic Courts (Somalis are moderate Shaa'fi Muslims) to police their own people and to prevent their men provoking new conflicts. Islam was the only force powerful enough to unite the Somalis; and it worked.

There have only been a half-dozen or so al Qaeda suspects who have — at one time or another — entered or exited through Somalia. But the Islamic Courts is not an al Qaeda organization. Still, US policy in the Muslim world is predicated on the “War on Terror,” so there’s an effort to undermine any successful Islamic model, whether it’s Hamas in Gaza, or Hizballah in Lebanon.

The US backed the brutal Somali warlords and created a counter-terrorism coalition which the Somalis saw as anti-Islamic. The Islamic Court militias organized a popular uprising that overthrew the warlords and restored peace and stability to much of Somalia for the first time in more than a decade. The streets were safe again, and exiled Somali businessmen returned home to help rebuild.

I was there during this time.

The Americans and Ethiopians would not tolerate the new arrangement. The Bush administration sees al Qaeda everywhere. So, they joined forces with the Ethiopians because Ethiopia’s proxies were overthrown in Mogadishu and because they feel threatened by Somali nationalism. With the help of the US, the Ethiopian army deposed the Islamic Courts and radicalized the population in the process. Now Somalia is more violent than ever and jihadi-type groups are beginning to emerge where none had previously existed.

**Question:** The US-led war in Afghanistan is not going well. The countryside is controlled by the warlords, the drug trade is flourishing, and America’s man in Kabul, Hamid Karzai, has little power beyond the capital. The Taliban has regrouped and is methodically capturing city after city in the south. Their base of support, among disenchanted Pashtuns, continues to grow. How important is it for the US to succeed in Afghanistan? Would failure threaten the future of NATO or the Transatlantic Alliance?

**Nir Rosen:** Although the US has lost in Afghanistan; what really matters is Pakistan. That’s where the Taliban and al Qaeda are actually located. No, I’m NOT saying that the US should take the war into Pakistan. The US has already done enough damage. But as long as America oppresses and alienates Muslims, they will continue to fight back.

**Question:** The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli sanctions for more than a year. Despite the harsh treatment — the lack of food, water and medical supplies (as well as the soaring unemployment and the random attacks in civilian areas) — there have been no retaliatory suicide attacks on Israeli civilians or IDF soldiers. Isn’t this proof that Hamas is serious about abandoning the armed struggle and joining the political process? Should Israel negotiate

directly with the “democratically elected” Hamas or continue its present strategy of shoring up Mahmoud Abbas and the PA?

**Nir Rosen:** Hamas won democratic elections that were widely recognized as free and fair; that is, as free and as fair as you can expect when Israel and America are backing one side while trying to shackle the other. Israel and the US never accepted the election results. That’s because Hamas refuses to capitulate. Also, Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood which is active in Egypt and Jordan and both those countries fear an example of a Muslim brothers in government, and they fear an example of a movement successfully defying the Americans and Israelis, so they backed Fatah. Everyone fears that these Islamic groups will become a successful model of resistance to American imperialism and hegemony. The regional dictators are especially afraid of these groups, so they work with the Americans to keep the pressure on their political rivals. Mahmoud Abbas’ Fatah collaborates with the US and Israel to undermine Hamas and force the government to collapse. Although they have failed so far; the US and Israel continue to support the same Fatah gangs that attempted the coup to oust Hamas. The plan backfired, and Hamas gunmen managed to drive Fatah out of Gaza after a number of violent skirmishes.

Israel should stop secretly supporting Fatah and adopt the “One State” solution. It should grant Palestinians and other non-Jews equal rights, abandon Zionism, allow Palestinian refugees to return, compensate them, and dismantle the settlements. If Israel doesn’t voluntarily adopt the One State solution and work for a peaceful transition, (like South Africa), then eventually it will face expulsion by the non-Jewish majority in Greater Palestine, just like the French colonists in Algeria.

This is not a question of being “pro” or “anti” Israel; that’s irrelevant when predicting the future, and for any rational observer of the region it’s clear that Israel is not a viable state in the Middle East as long as it is Zionist.

**Question:** The US military is seriously over-stretched. Still, many political analysts believe that Bush will order an aerial assault on Iran. Do you think the US will carry out a “Lebanon-type” attack on Iran; bombing roads, bridges, factories, government buildings, oil depots, Army bases, munitions dumps, airports and nuclear sites? Will Iran retaliate or simply lend their support to resistance fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq?

**Nir Rosen:** I think it’s quite likely that Bush will attack Iran; not because he has a good reason to, but because Jesus or God told him to and because Iran is part of the front-line resistance (along with Hizballah, Syria and Hamas) to American hegemony in the region. Bush believes nobody will have the balls to go after the Iranians after him. He believes that history will vindicate him and he’ll be looked up to as a hero, like Reagan.

There is also a racist element in this. Bush thinks that Iran is a culture based on honor and shame. He believes that if you humiliate the Iranian regime, then the people will rise up and overthrow it. Of course, in reality, when you bomb a country the people end up hating you and rally around the regime. Just look at the reaction of the Serbs after the bombing by NATO, or the Americans after September 11.

Iran is more stable than Iraq and has a stronger military. Also, the US is very vulnerable in the region — both in Iraq and Afghanistan. America’s allies are even more vulnerable. An attack on Iran could ignite a regional war that would spiral out of control. Nothing good would come of it.



The Bush administration needs to negotiate with Iran and pressure Israel to abandon its nuclear weapons.

**Question:** Bush's war on terror now extends from the southern border of Somalia to the northern tip of Afghanistan — from Africa, through the Middle East into Central Asia. The US has not yet proven — in any of these conflicts — that it can enforce its will through military means alone. In fact, in every case, the military appears to be losing ground. And it's not just the military that's bogged down either. Back in the United States, the economy is rapidly deteriorating. The dollar is falling, the housing market is collapsing, consumer spending is shrinking, and the country's largest investment banks are bogged down with over \$200 billion in mortgage-backed debt. Given the current state of the military and the economy, do you see any way that the Bush administration can prevail in the "war on terror" or is US power in a state of irreversible decline?

**Nir Rosen:** Terror is a tactic; so you can't go to war with it in the first place. You can only go to war with people or nations. To many people it seems like the US is at war with Muslims. This is just radicalizing more people and eroding America's power and influence in the world. But, then, maybe that's not such a bad thing.

*Nir Rosen's book on postwar Iraq, "In the Belly of the Green Bird: The Triumph of the Martyrs in Iraq," was published by Free Press in 2006.*

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