

Mirage of Improvement in Iraq: Yet Another Facelift for the Failed Occupation

Half the population of Iraq are either refugees, in need of emergency aid, wounded, or dead

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The *New York Times* Nov 19 announces, “Baghdad’s Weary Start to Exhale as Security Improves.”

The *Washington Post* Nov. 23 reports, “Returnees Find a Capital Transformed.”

People in the US are willing to believe the establishment media telling them that refugees are returning to their homes in Baghdad in an environment of improved security and new hope.

It is true that there have been fewer American soldiers killed in Baghdad and the number of Iraqis fleeing to Syria has declined. However, this relatively quieter security situation needs to be placed in its proper context, something the Western media steadfastly refuses to do.

We are proudly informed that buying off Sunni militias and resistance fighters at \$300 per month is among the latest U.S. military tactics, but we are conscientiously kept uninformed about the implications of such a move. Nor is there any mention of the growing antagonism it has generated in the US-backed Iraqi Government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. By its own admission, the U.S. military has paid over \$17 million, so far, to recruit 77,000 Sunni fighters, many of whom were launching attacks against the Americans a few weeks ago ([International Herald Tribune](#)).

Post purchase, the US military has rechristened them “Concerned Local Citizens,” or “Awakening Forces.” The target is to procure another 10,000.

The current recruitment has indeed contributed to a de-escalation of violence in the capital city, and across much of al-Anbar province, which comprises one third of the geographic area of Iraq.

Reiterated Strategy

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After it failed to take control of Fallujah during the April 2004 assault, the US employed a similar tactic. It was a presidential election year in the US (as is 2008) and in order to save

face, the U.S. military “handed” over security operations in Fallujah to the very people it had fought in April. Money and weapons flooded the city and strengthened the mujahedeen.

At the time a much larger battle was in the offing, the November 2004 U.S. siege of Fallujah, which left thousands dead, and destroyed approximately 70 percent of the city. It is worth noting that the attack was launched on November 8, 2004, just days after it was determined that George W. Bush would remain in office.

Under the “new and improved” conditions, consider the following:

- the fragility of the political balance in Iraq;
 - the Middle Eastern regional instability;
 - the ever intensifying U.S. threats of an attack against Iran;
 - the likelihood of the “Concerned Local Citizens” staying loyal to their new masters;
- and then let us consider what calamity awaits the occupied country.

Political Capital

Both the Maliki government and the Bush administration are using the return of refugees as political capital. This projection bears little relation to the ground reality.

To place an inconsequential fact on record, since the beginning of the US “surge” earlier this year, the number of people displaced from their homes in Iraq has quadrupled, and the number of detentions carried out by both Iraqi and U.S. security forces has escalated astronomically. On November 13, the International Committee for the Red Cross estimated there are around [60,000 people detained](#) in U.S. and Iraqi prisons around Iraq.

Refugees returning to Baghdad have been projected in the West as evidence of the “surge” having brought security to Baghdad. Both the Maliki government and the Bush administration are using them as political capital. This projection bears little relation to the ground reality which indicates a steep decline in the number of returnees.

A recent UN survey, revealing the modest number of families returning to Baghdad, shows that “46 percent were leaving [Syria] because they could not afford to stay; 25 percent said they fell victim to a stricter Syrian visa policy; and only 14 percent said they were returning because they had heard about improved security” ([The New York Times](#)).

It crucial to consider, but evidently not by the western media, that as of October 1st the Syrian government has imposed new visa restrictions whereby Iraqis who can prove they need medical treatment or intend to conduct business alone are permitted entry into Syria.

Iraqis who are barred entrance have the option of staying in a refugee camp on the border in the middle of the desert, or returning home.

Not More is Not Less

“It is true that hundreds of fighters were killed or detained by the so-called Awakening Forces, but there are thousands who will never quit fighting until this occupation is ended.”

Let us not discount the fact that the “lower violence rate” being reported by the Western media establishments imply that violence in Iraq is now down to 2005 levels, which at the time was considered catastrophic. A recent Pew Research Center poll found that “nearly 90

percent of US journalists in Iraq say much of Baghdad is still too dangerous to visit.” Those surveyed have admitted that the “coverage has painted too rosy a picture of the conflict” ([Reuters](#)).

The not-so-rosy reality is that the resistance has merely shifted location. As Ali Khamees, a former major of the Iraqi army, recently told my Iraqi colleague in Ramadi, Ali al-Fadhily, “it is true that hundreds of fighters were killed or detained by the so-called Awakening Forces, but there are thousands who will never quit fighting until this occupation is ended. I believe it is a new strategy employed by the resistance to reduce the suffering of people in al-Anbar and move somewhere else to fight.”

Attacks against U.S. forces have increased notably in other Iraqi provinces like Diyala, Saladin and Mosul.

On November 28, a female suicide bomber wounded seven US soldiers in Baquba, the capital city of the volatile Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad. The previous day in the same city, another suicide bomber detonated his explosives filled vest in front of the police headquarters, killing six people and wounding seven, according to Iraqi police reports.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a 32 year old Ramadi resident cautioned my Iraqi colleague, al-Fadhily, “those Americans thought they would decrease the resistance attacks by separating the people of Iraq into sects and tribes. They are going deeper into the shifting sand. The collaborators are fooling the Americans right now, and will in the end use this strategy against them.”

Provinces like Saladin, Diyala and the Kurdish controlled north, now under regular bombardment from the Turkish military which is threatening invasion, have become more volatile than ever.

The Bush administration talks of withdrawing up to 5,000 troops from Diyala province, but on November 24 US military officials revealed that the overall number of American troops in Diyala will actually increase since the replacement brigade for the one being removed is larger and will mean more boots on the ground.

Crafting Political Chaos

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The U.S. policy of propping up the Sunni militias whilst backing the Shia government has heightened the volatility of an already precarious political situation. Deep fissures are one fall out of this classic divide and rule tactic.

On November 29, legislators blocked Prime Minister Maliki’s attempts to get approval for nominees to fill the vacant portfolios of justice and communications in the cabinet. This was done by getting legislators from several parties to boycott the session and ensure that parliament did not have the requisite quorum to vote on the nominations.

The cabinet and parliament in Baghdad remain paralyzed thereby effectively derailing US efforts to push legislation for privatization of Iraq’s oil. Over a dozen ministers have quit Maliki’s government this year. These include members of the Accordance Front, the largest Sunni block in the parliament, which withdrew its support in August. The cabinet is presently

composed primarily of Shia and Kurds which only underscores the sectarian and ethnic battle lines that the U.S. policies have drawn in Iraq.

Before swallowing the Bush administration rhetoric of things getting better in Iraq today, we would do well to cast a glance at the real picture of the calamitous occupation.

The [Just Foreign Policy](#) group in the US places over 1.1 million Iraqis dead as a direct result of the US led invasion and occupation. A conservative estimate of the wounded would be 3 million.

The [UNHCR](#) enlists an approximate 2.2 million Iraqis that have fled the country altogether, and another 2.4 million that have been internally displaced. An [Oxfam International](#) report released in July found another 4 million Iraqis who were in need of emergency assistance.

Iraq's population at the time of the US invasion in March 2003 was roughly 27 million, and today it is approximately 23 million. Elementary arithmetic indicates that currently over half the population of Iraq are either refugees, in need of emergency aid, wounded, or dead.

While the US establishment media proffers us the assurance of "Baghdad's Weary Start to Exhale as Security Improves," for most Iraqis safe and secure survival remains a distant dream. For Americans it is perhaps time to act on the words of Carl Schurz and "cling to the watchword of true patriotism: 'Our country — when right to be kept right; when wrong to be put right.'"

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