

Rebranding Iraq: Playing with Numbers and Human Lives

The US has no real intention of withdrawing

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

The soldiers of the US 4th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division hollered as they made their way into Kuwait. "We won," they claimed. "It's over."

But what exactly did they win?

And is the war really over?

It seems we are once again walking into the same trap, the same nonsensical assumptions of wars won, missions accomplished, troops withdrawn, and jolly soldiers carrying cardboard signs of heart-warming messages like "Lindsay & Austin ... Dad's coming home."

While much of the media is focused on the logistics of the misleading withdrawal of the "last combat brigade" from Iraq on August 19 – some accentuating the fact that the withdrawal is happening two weeks ahead of the August 31 deadline – most of us are guilty of forgetting Iraq and its people. When the economy began to take center stage, we completely dropped the war off our list of grievances.

But this is not about memory, or a way of honoring the dead and feeling compassion for the living. Forgetting wars leads to a complete polarization of discourses, thus allowing the crafters of war to sell the public whatever suits their interests and stratagems.

In an August 22 Washington Post article entitled "Five myths about the Iraq troop withdrawal", Kenneth M Pollack unravels the first "myth": "As of this month, the United States no longer has combat troops in Iran." Pollack claims this idea is "not even close" because "roughly 50,000 American military personnel remain in Iraq, and the majority are still combat troops – they're just named something else. The major units still in Iraq will no longer be called "brigade combat teams" and instead will be called "advisory and assistance brigades". But a rose by any other name is still a rose, and the differences in brigade structure and personnel are minimal.

So what if the US army downgrades its military presence in Iraq and re-labels over 50,000 remaining soldiers? Will the US military now stop chasing after perceived terrorist threats? Will it concede an inch of its unchallenged control over Iraqi skies? Will it relinquish power over the country's self-serving political elite? Will it give up its influence over every relevant aspect of life in the country, from the now autonomous Kurdish region in the north all the way to the border with Kuwait in the south, which the jubilant soldiers crossed while hollering the shrieks of victory?

The Iraq war has been one of the most well-controlled wars the US has ever fought, in terms of its language and discourse. Even those opposed to the war tend to be misguided as to their reasons: "Iraqis need to take charge of their own country"; "Iraq is a sectarian society and America cannot rectify that"; "It is not possible to create a Western-style democracy in Iraq"; "It's a good thing Saddam Hussein was taken down, but the US should have left straight after". These ideas might be described as "anti-war", but they are all based on fallacious assumptions that were fed to us by the same recycled official and media rhetoric.

It's no wonder that the so-called anti-war movement waned significantly after the election of President Barack Obama. The new president merely shifted military priorities from Iraq to Afghanistan. His government is now re-branding the Iraq war, although maintaining the interventionist spirit behind it. It makes perfect sense that the US State Department is now the one in charge of the future mission in Iraq. The occupation of Iraq, while it promises much violence and blood, is now a political scheme. It requires good public relations.

The State Department will now supervise future violence in Iraq, which is likely to increase in coming months due to the ongoing political standoff and heightened sectarian divisions. An attack blamed on al-Qaeda in an Iraqi army recruitment center on August 17 claimed 61 lives and wounded many. "Iraqi officials say July saw the deaths of more than 500 people, including 396 civilians, making it the deadliest month for more than two years," reported Robert Tait in Radio Free Europe.

Since the March elections, Iraq has had no government. The political rift in the country, even among the ruling Shi'ite groups, is large and widening. The disaffected Sunnis have been humiliated and collectively abused because of the misguided claim that they were favored by Saddam. Hate is brewing and the country's internal affairs are being handled jointly by some of the most corrupt politicians the world has ever known.

Washington understands that it needs to deliver on some of Obama's many campaign promises before the November elections. Thus the re-branding campaign, which could hide the fact that the US has no real intention of removing itself from the Iraq's military or political milieus. But since the current number of military personnel might not be enough to handle the deepening security chaos in the country, the new caretakers at the State Department are playing with numbers.

"State Department spokesman P J Crowley said [a] plan would bring to some 7,000 the total security contractors employed by the government in Iraq, where since the 2003 US invasion private security firms have often been accused of acting above the law," according to Reuters.

It's important that we understand the number game is just a game. Many colonial powers in the past controlled their colonies through the use of local forces and minimal direct involvement. Those of us oppose the Iraq war should do so based on the guiding principle that foreign invasions, occupations and interventions in sovereign countries' affairs are a direct violation of international law. It is precisely the interventionist mindset that must be confronted, challenged, and rejected.

While it is a good thing that thousands of American dads are now coming home, we must also remember that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi moms and dads never did. Millions of refugees from the US-led invasion are still circling the country and the Middle East.

War is not about numbers and dates. It's about people, their rights, their freedom and their future. Re-branding the army and the war will provide none of this for grief-stricken and vulnerable Iraqis.

The fact is, no one has won this war. And the occupation is anything but over.

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