

Q & A: Shibley Telhami and Joost Hiltermann

November 20, 2006

WPO Talks with the University of Maryland's Shibley Telhami and International Crisis Group's Joost Hiltermann

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World Public Opinion's managing editor, Mary Speck, asked them to discuss some key findings of our 2006 nationwide surveys of Iraqi opinion, conducted Sept 1-4 and Jan. 2-5.

In January 2006 most Shias (84%) believed their country was heading in the right direction. In our September poll, only 59% believed this, a 25-point drop. The number of Shias who think ousting Saddam Hussein was worth it has also dropped by 25 points (from 98% to 75%). What are the major factors behind this drop in Shia confidence?

Telhami: The Shias were very happy to see ouster of the Saddam Hussein regime. They knew they would be empowered as the majority, even though they also knew the United States overthrew Saddam for its own reasons. But as the scale of death and destruction has increased—as well as the lack of services, jobs, the unpredictability of life—it's not surprising that Shias are less confident. Though most Shias are obviously still happy to see Saddam gone, the fact that even some Shia almost long for the days when he was in power tells you something about the kind of lives they are living today.

Hiltermann: The sharp increase in sectarian violence comes in the wake of the Samarra shrine bombing in February 2006. This underlined the growing lawlessness and chaos. Many Iraqis that I know, who had remained guardedly optimistic before that, turned depressed over Iraq's future. What people crave most is stability, and Saddam's regime, for all its brutality, delivered that, and everyone knew that as long as you kept your mouths shut, things should normally be okay. By contrast, today, you may be attacked by anyone at anytime; violence is arbitrary and indiscriminate. There is nothing that people fear more, because of its unpredictability.

More ominously, more Shias approve of attacks on U.S. forces, up from 41 percent to 62 percent. Nine out of ten Shias (91%) have little or no confidence in U.S. forces—making them nearly as unhappy with the U.S. military as the Sunnis (98% little or no confidence).

Telhami: This is one of the most troubling aspects for the United States. Neither Shias nor Sunnis had any illusions about the United States' reasons for overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Like other Arabs, they believed that the United States did it for the wrong reasons, such as to control oil, help Israel and weaken the Arab world. But the Shias felt empowered by his overthrow and they were prepared to work with the United States.

Now the Shias feel disillusioned for a variety of reasons. They have not taken full control as they were expecting to. They are frustrated that they were not given advanced weapons, frustrated with the United States' role in promoting negotiations with the Sunnis. Some may have been frustrated by U.S. criticism of Iran. The war in Lebanon may also have had an impact on Shia opinion in Iraq.

What's most troubling is that the United States is not only seen in a negative light but as an enemy. This feeling is much stronger than before and it is in harmony with a regional perspective I have found in surveys conducted in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. When asked to name the two countries that pose the greatest threat, the vast majority, about 80 percent, name the United States and Israel.

Hiltermann: Shiites are losing confidence in U.S. forces for two reasons. One, U.S. forces have not protected them from sectarian and criminal violence, and, two, a growing number of Shiites suspect that the U.S. is turning its support toward the Sunnis. Iraqis (whether Sunnis or Shiites) want the U.S. out of Iraq, because after the regime's removal (which they applaud) it has only brought chaos. But they also know that the U.S., for all its blunders, is still keeping the army together and is serving as a buffer between Shiite militias (Badr and Mahdi), so a precipitous departure could spell disaster for the country.

Sunni opinion is moving in the opposite direction on the issue of when U.S. forces should withdraw. In January, 83 percent wanted U.S. forces out within six months. In September 57 percent did. Why are Sunnis becoming more dubious about the wisdom of a quick U.S. withdrawal?

Telhami: It is important to emphasize that the vast majority of both Sunnis and Shias want the United States out. But the breakdown of Sunnis and Shias on this issue has changed somewhat. There are probably two reasons. One is the active role of the United States in promoting negotiations with the Sunnis. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad is portrayed by Shias as taking the Sunni side in the debate. Two, the balance of power between the Sunnis and Shias has changed. Early on it favored the Sunnis, who, although they are a minority, were better organized and better armed. Now the balance of power seems to have shifted toward the Shias, which may have given some Sunnis pause about what might happen once the United States withdraws.

The United States is seen as making a shift back to supporting its Sunni allies in the Arab world—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan—against Iran and Hezbollah. This perception may also have had an impact in the way Sunnis and Shias in Iraq view the United States and its role there.

Hiltermann: [Sunnis] are seeing Iran advancing its interests in Iraq and they regard the U.S. as the only country able to stand up to Iran. This trend started two years ago but is becoming very pronounced now. Dangerously so, in fact, as many Sunni leaders now seem to think that the U.S. is ready to abandon the Shiite-led government in Baghdad and replace it with a "nationalist" government.

Shia overall say they prefer a strong government that would get rid of militias (65%). But among Shia in Baghdad, a majority (59%) says they would prefer to continue to have militias protect their security. The Shia in Baghdad also tend to believe that inter-ethnic violence will increase (59%) if the U.S. withdraws in six months while Shia in other areas think ethnic violence will decrease (64%). Do Shias in Baghdad feel more dependent on militias to protect themselves from attack?

Telhami: Militias are an integral part of life in Sadr City [a predominantly Shia slum in eastern Baghdad]. It is not just a militia to Shias there. It provides services that they need, it does things for them that the government is not doing. Support for the militias in Baghdad could also be a function of the uncertainty they feel about whether the government can do much in the short term to protect their security.

Hiltermann: Yes, as do Shiites living in all areas of mixed population. The militias came about in response to insurgent violence, which was most pronounced in mixed-population areas.