

Iraqi Public Opinion on the Presence of US Troops

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Subcommittee Chairman Rep. Bill Delahunt: And next we have Dr. Steven Kull, the director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes testified during the kickoff in the wrap-up hearing for our hearings -- our inquiry, rather, into how the United States is viewed by the rest of the world.

I don't have the time to list his various expert qualifications as a pollster, because he has just one that counts to most of us: There's nobody that we trust more to interpret polling and focus groups results for us, and today he will address and educate us on Iraqi opinion about the issues surrounding the U.S.-Iraq agreement: timetables, withdrawals, sovereignty and the presence of U.S. forces.

Thank you again, Steve, for joining us.... Dr. Kull, would you please proceed?



DR. KULL: Thank you for inviting me to speak. Today I will be addressing the question of how the Iraqi people view the presence of US troops in Iraq and, more importantly, what they want to see happen in the future. As I will demonstrate, the Iraqi people are showing signs of impatience with the pace of US withdrawal.

Now one may ask why this matters. Obviously the Iraqi people will not be negotiating the agreements about US forces in Iraq. As long as the government wants US troops there, one may believe that it does not matter what the Iraqi public thinks.

However, it does appear that the Iraqi government is paying attention to the Iraqi public. As you probably know, 144 of the 275 members of Parliament signed a letter calling for a

timetable for the withdrawal of US troops, citing as a key reason the attitudes of the Iraqi people. This call for a timetable was then reiterated in the June 3rd letter presented to the US Congress from representatives of the Iraqi Parliament. Just in the last few days Prime Minister Maliki has been increasingly aligning himself with this public pressure. This may well be influenced by the prospect of upcoming elections.

Thus, if the US government wishes to play a constructive role in the future of Iraq it behooves us to understand better the dynamics of public opinion and thus the forces of the political universe within which Iraqi leaders are operating.

Furthermore, Iraqis' attitudes about US forces are likely to affect their readiness to cooperate with coalition efforts to fight the insurgency, or even their readiness to support the insurgency. There is evidence that many Iraqis do support attacks on US troops and that this attitude is related to perceptions of US long-term intentions in Iraq. Thus dealing with these perceptions is critical to the success of the mission.

So turning now to the polling data: is the story simply that Iraqis want US forces to leave Iraq? I will indeed be presenting some data that say that Iraqis want US troops to leave within a near-term time frame.

But I will then show some data suggesting that their attitudes are not quite that simple: That there is some interest in a continuing relationship with US forces, but only in a context in which the relationship between the US and the Iraqi government is fundamentally changed from what it is now.

I will start with the most recent polling. In March of this year ORB conducted a poll for the British Channel 4, asking Iraqis what they would like to see happen with the Multinational Forces. Seventy percent said they want the Multi National Forces to leave, with 78 percent of this group wanting them to leave within six months or less and 84 percent within a year. Thus about six in ten of the whole sample said they want the troops out within a year or less.

In a poll conducted in February of this year for a consortium of news outlets led by ABC News, 73 percent said they oppose the presence of coalition forces in Iraq. Sixty-one percent said that the presence of US forces in Iraq is making the security situation in Iraq worse.

Iraqis have been asking for a timetable for withdrawal for some time now. At the beginning of 2006 WorldPublicOpinion.org found that 7 in 10 wanted US-led forces out according to timetable of two years or less. About a year later 7 in 10 favored a timetable of one year or less.

In late 2006 the US State Department conducted polls in numerous major Iraqi cities and consistently found about two-thirds calling for the US to leave.

While some might think that the Iraqi people should be impressed with the results of the surge on stability in Iraq, most insist that they are not. In the Channel 4 poll only 26 percent said that the surge had succeeded while 53 percent said that it had not. The ABC News poll found only about a third saying that the surge had a positive effect on security and slightly over half said that it had made security worse.

Iraqis seem to shrug off concerns about the security implications of a US withdrawal. Asked by ABC News what impact it would have on the overall security situation "if American forces left the country entirely," only 29 percent say that it would become worse. Forty-six percent said it would get better and 23 percent said it would be the same. Asked about the British withdrawal from Basra, 6 in 10 say that the security situation there is the same or better. In the WorldPublicOpinion.org poll 58 percent predicted that if US-led forces were to leave Iraq inter-ethnic violence would go down, and 61 percent predicted that day-to-day security would improve.

Now, all this said, it would seem that the Iraqis are giving a pretty unequivocal message for US-led forces to leave Iraq within a fairly narrow time frame. However, there are other poll questions in which the Iraqi people express a desire for some degree of continued involvement.

The very same ABC News poll that delivered some of the harshest criticism of US troops also asked whether the US should have "a future role" in a number of areas. Remarkably high numbers said that it should. Seventy-six percent favored the US providing training and weapons to the Iraqi army. Eight in 10 favored the US participating in security operations against al-Qaeda or other jihadists operating in Iraq--something that would, of course, be at odds with the US completely withdrawing all its forces.

Support for non-military forms of involvement has also been high. The WorldPublicOpinion.org poll found 68 percent favoring "helping Iraqis organize their communities to address local needs such as building schools and health clinics."

More broadly, the Channel 4 poll asked Iraqis whether they want the US to play a larger or smaller role in the future of Iraq. Only 22 percent said they want the US to play a smaller role. The largest number--40 percent--said they want the US to play a bigger role and another 13 percent want America's role to remain the same as now.

So what is going on here? How is it that on one hand Iraqis think the presence of US troops makes the security situation worse and they should leave within a year, and on the other hand that it would be very nice if they were to train Iraqi forces and help with the security situation vis-à-vis al Qaeda?

Here is my interpretation. There are two frames through which Iraqis view US-led forces in their country. One frame--the weaker frame--is that security in Iraq is still fragile and that the US may be able to offer some aid to Iraq.

The other and more dominant frame is that the United States has effectively occupied Iraq. As early as 2004 Gallup asked Iraqis whether they primarily thought of coalition forces as liberators or occupiers. Seventy-one percent said occupiers.

In a variety of ways Iraqis signal that they do not feel that they have genuine sovereignty. In our September 2006 poll 77 percent said that they assumed that the US plans to have permanent bases in Iraq. More importantly, 78 percent said they thought that if the Iraqi government were to tell the US to withdraw its forces, the US would refuse to do so.

Our analysis of this poll found that frustration with this situation may be related to support for attacks on US troops. A disturbingly high 61 percent of Iraqis said that they approved of attacks on US troops. What was curious was that approximately half of these same people who approved of attacks on US troops said they did not actually want the troops to leave immediately. Rather, it appears that they supported the attacks because they thought it was necessary to put pressure on US troops to leave eventually.

So what does this suggest? It suggests that what is key here is that the US needs to address the feeling held by most Iraqis that they are not being treated as a sovereign power.

One way that has been widely discussed is for the US to set a timetable for withdrawal. This would make unambiguous that US troops will eventually leave.

Some have argued that a timetable would weaken the government because it would send a signal to the insurgents that the US is not determined to stay the course. However, WorldPublicOpinion.org has found that only one in four Iraqis appear to agree. Rather, 53 percent have said that a timetable would strengthen the government. Presumably this would be because it would contribute to the perception that the government is, or at least will soon be, the real power in the country.

More fundamentally, the US must find ways to show respect for the Iraqi government. It should be recognized that for the US to have such powers as the right to arrest and imprison Iraqis independent of the oversight of the Iraqi government weakens the perception that the Iraqi government is in charge. Most important, though, convincingly sending the message that the US will only be in Iraq as long as the government wants it to be is central. The idea proposed by Michael Matheson of basing the UN Mandate governing the presence of US troops on Chapter VI rather than Chapter VII could be a meaningful way of codifying that US troops are in Iraq at the will of the Iraqi government.

In closing, it is clear that the Iraqi people are quite eager for the US to lighten its military footprint in Iraq. More importantly it appears that they are eager to regain their sense of sovereignty. As long as they do not have this sense, they are likely to continue to have a fundamentally hostile attitude toward all aspects of the US presence in Iraq. However, as Iraqis gradually regain this sense that their country belongs to them, they will likely move

toward wanting some ongoing relationship with the US, both economic and military, to help them find their way out of this troubled period of their long history.

Thank you for your attention.