

## 'Shadows of the Images': The Allegory of Iraq

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#### Introduction

The Bush Administration's perceptions of the Iraq War bring to mind Plato's Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic*. Nothing illustrates this more than the shadows and echoes brought before Congress in September by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Their shadow play, whether intentional or not, fails to convey a picture of Iraq that can move us toward stability and (relative) peace.

What was missing from the performance, and indeed from nearly all reflections about Iraq, are two key variables: the scale and effect of the violence that continues to ravage the country, and the role of the neighbors in promoting or stemming violence and instability.

The Iraq Study Group's report of late 2006 had recommended regional discussions to move toward a solution to the mounting, multipolar violence in Iraq. At the time, the Bush Administration seemed to completely dismiss the ISG's views, opting instead for the troop surge and benchmarks strategy that, by most independent estimates, has had mixed results at best.<sup>[1]</sup> Diplomacy remains low on the list of priorities, and the few contacts with neighboring states have been unproductive, indifferent, or hostile. Petraeus and Crocker's appearances on Capitol Hill brace the Administration's tendencies to favor military action over diplomacy—a fraying, old script.

#### Violence and the Neighbors

On the role of the neighbors, for example, notable attention is given to Iran, but few others. The activities of Iran in the war, moreover, have the look of a felony indictment rather than an overall assessment. That is, Petraeus and others in the Multi-National Force command have made allegations about weapons coming in from Iran to be used by militias against U.S. troops. "It is increasingly apparent," Petraeus told Congress, "to both coalition and Iraqi leaders that Iran, through the use of the Qods Force, seeks to turn the Iraqi Special Groups into a Hezbollah-like force to serve its interests and fight a proxy war against the Iraqi state and coalition forces in Iraq."<sup>[2]</sup> In the same appearance, Ambassador Crocker, U.S. envoy to Iraq since March 2007, echoed Petraeus' comment and offered little in the way of other regional actors offering concrete ideas or steps to stabilize Iraq.

Among the maps Petraeus displayed at the hearings was one, "Major Threats to Iraq," purportedly showing the sources of violence in Iraq. Nearly all identified sources had to do with

Iran or their supposed proxies. And all violent actors coming from outside Iraq originate in Syria or Iran. But as Ahmed Hashim, among others, has described in his *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*, that among those violently fighting the U.S. military and the Iraqi state, “the foreign element is miniscule.” To the extent there is a foreign element, he describes a first wave to be Palestinians from refugee camps, and a second, larger wave of “mostly Islamic militants recruited throughout Europe and the Middle East and then sent to Iraq through the same elaborate human pipeline the *mujahideen* used to send volunteers to the Balkans, Chechnya, and Afghanistan.” Hashim has noted that a high percentage of foreign fighters caught in Iraq are from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries apart from Syria, a calculation reflected broadly in other empirical accounts.<sup>[3]</sup> Nor have the repeated attempts to link Iran to supply of weapons to insurgents to kill American soldiers, particularly roadside bombs or IEDs, been convincing.<sup>[4]</sup>

None of this is reflected in Petraeus’ or Crocker’s assertions, or those of their superiors in the U.S. Government. What we do see in Administration depictions of the war is a broad and persistent misperception of a chaotic battle environment and chaotic policy processes. “The fundamental source of the conflict in Iraq is competition among ethnic and sectarian communities for power and resources,” Petraeus argued in his testimony. “Foreign and home-grown terrorists, insurgents, militia extremists, and criminals all push the ethno-sectarian competition toward violence. Malign actions by Syria and, especially, by Iran fuel that violence.”<sup>[5]</sup>

The violence is significantly blamed on outsiders—Iran, Syria, and Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (another dimly glimpsed force)—rather than on ungrateful, bumptious Iraqis themselves, who are merely engaging in competition for power and resources, or on the coalition forces, a topic discussed below. But these broad depictions of foreign influence make it seem as though the principal activity of the neighbors is to attack Americans and supply the intramural “competition,” which by nearly every independent reckoning would reject as, to put it kindly, an incomplete picture. Even by the U.S. military’s own calculations, foreign fighters make up no more than, at most, 10 percent of all violent actors.

Violent actors from outside Iraq are predominantly *not* from Iran and Syria. Consider this compilation<sup>[6]</sup> at the end of 2006:

The 311 captured foreigners came from 27 different countries. The largest number came from Egypt (78), Syria (66), Sudan (41), Saudi Arabia (32), Jordan (17), Iran (13), Palestine (12), and Tunisia (10). Western countries were also represented. Two insurgents came from Great Britain and one came from the U.S., Denmark, Ireland and France. The countries that round out the list are: Algeria (8); Libya (7); Turkey (6); Lebanon (3); Qatar (2); UAE (2); India (2); Macedonia (1); Morocco (1); Somalia (1); Yemen (1); Israel (1); Indonesia (1); and Kuwait (1).

In this list, then, no more than 25 percent are from Syria and Iran, and likely fewer since some who enter Iraq from Syria have Syrian papers but originate elsewhere. Other accounts have Syrian and Iranian numbers about the same, but Algerians far more prominent (which is an interesting sidebar to the Iraq story—*i.e.*, that we can expect fighters from Iraq to appear in other conflicts in future years).<sup>[7]</sup>

The financing for the violent groups, moreover, appears to be mainly self-generated (through theft and smuggling) or supplied by the likes of Saudi Arabia. Iran, doubtlessly, is also supplying money to Shia militias, but this is only one slice of a much larger pie. Weapons acquisitions and supply are also diverse—there has been no shortage of weapons in Iraq from the beginning of the war.

The new wrinkle regionally is the increased activity of Kurdish rebels against both Iran and Turkey, terrorism that is harbored by the Kurdish entity in northern Iraq. The provincial government headed by Masoud Barzani pledges to curb the Kurdish rebels, but these assurances have been

made before without being honored. There are concerns that the United States is turning a blind eye—or worse, giving support—to the rebels fighting Iran as part of a broader strategy to destabilize the Tehran regime. But what is known is already worrisome: Turkey's blistering anger at Barzani's duplicity and his obvious desire to declare an independent Kurdish state, with the rebels as accomplices. At the same time, the tumultuous status of Kirkuk, which is a contested, oil-rich governorate south of "Kurdistan" but which Barzani hopes to annex through a referendum, throws more fuel on this rising fire. Turkey has vowed to prevent such an annexation.

## Diplomacy and the Neighbors

One of the principal recommendations of the Iraq Study Group was for the United States to involve the neighbors in trying to lower the sources of violence in Iraq and to promote stability. There has always been a question about what any of them could do to this end, apart from refraining from destabilizing activities. But the sensible notion that no peace was possible without the active support of the bordering states—a virtual truism of all peace agreements—naturally leads sensible people to implement an assertive diplomatic strategy that has yet to emanate from Foggy Bottom.<sup>[8]</sup>

When the United States did agree to a regional forum last spring after initial coolness to the Baker-Hamilton report, it was widely regarded as an acknowledgement that the report was correct. The diplomacy has failed to materialize, however, as the rare interactions with Syria and Iran have devolved into blaming salvos without concrete steps resulting. If anything, U.S. actions toward the Islamic Republic are veering close to war. The ISG's recommendation nonetheless remains valid, remaining one of the few plausible options for U.S. action that could yield progress.

For Iran, the Iraq war is both an opportunity and a hazard. The opportunities are clear—an end to the lethal enemy, Saddam Hussein, and the rise of the Shia majority to power. The hazards are nonetheless real, particularly roiling instability and violence, refugees, continuing U.S. occupation and possibly permanent bases, and the rise of a rival Shia power. As a result, Iran is active in Iraq, as was expected. Its exact goals are not clear, although the humiliation of the United States and the departure of U.S. forces are surely atop their list, as is the consolidation of friendly Shia political figures in the central government and the southern governorates.

Syrian interests are somewhat more difficult to fathom, given its long and bumptious history with the Ba'ath Party in Iraq, the colossal scale of the refugee crisis (nearly one million Iraqis now in Syria), and the ardent hope of driving a chastened United States out of the region.

These interests, such as they are, appear to be so at odds with U.S. goals in Iraq that diplomacy does not look promising. But that is true only if Washington views Iraq as a long-term platform for U.S. military operations in the Gulf. A promise to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq and to reduce the U.S. presence in the region would potentially open diplomatic doors. Such a withdrawal, dicey though it may be, would seem to be the *sine qua non* for Iran and Syria to join with a regional forum to stabilize Iraq. Since withdrawal seems inevitable—it is timing and scale that remain in doubt—the offer of withdrawal should not be an obstacle. In fact, it is more the reaction of Saudi Arabia and Jordan to this prospect that is problematic: both may step up support for Sunni insurgent groups as a consequence of an American drawdown. The specter of violence, and orchestrated violence as a response, again appears as a decisive factor.

That is all the more reason why a regional forum becomes a necessity. Bilateral diplomacy and coercion are obvious failures. But the United States is also caught in a dilemma: attracting Iran and Syria (and now, possibly, Turkey) into constructive dialogue probably means discussing post-coalition security arrangements, i.e., discussions predicated on U.S., withdrawal. But that very condition may launch the Saudis, Jordanians (and possibly the Israelis) in a direction that keeps tensions high. Only a regional forum, where all players are at the table and a substantive set of

objectives is the actual goal (rather than photo and accusation ops), has the chance to build mechanisms, obligations, and incentives for the neighbors to contribute to a solution.

## Violence and the Coalition

Among the shadows and echoes that divert from a clearer understanding of the war is one largely neglected topic—the human cost of the war. A bizarrely narrow debate among defense analysts broke out shortly after Petraeus' September testimony with regard to casualties, even as evidence of colossal human suffering was mounting. The echoes in the cave had civilian deaths at about 15,000-30,000 annually, when it is well established that such numbers are partial counts—partial in both meanings of the word. Three independent, household surveys estimate mortality from the war in the hundreds of thousands.[9]

While controversial, these survey estimates are far more accurate than the morgue counts registered by the Sadrist Ministry of Health (when they deign to release numbers, which is rarely) or the Brookings Iraq Index and others who rely on the MoH. These survey numbers are derived from standard statistical methods and now have been repeated enough to suggest robustness. The method is “active surveillance”—going out and asking the question about death—rather than the “passive surveillance” of morgue reports, which cannot guess at what is not being reported. Hence, the gross underestimates of mortality in the news media and among some defense analysts. By not understanding the method of household surveys and relying instead on actual counting, which is incomplete to a degree no one knows, the defense establishment generally does not grasp the extent of the mayhem in Iraq, and therefore its implications.

The mayhem is visible not only in the survey numbers, but in other metrics of suffering. At least 4 million people have been displaced.[10] Oxfam reports that more than one million households are headed by widows, half from during the war. “Daily life for the average Iraqi civilian remains extremely precarious,” says the U.N. office in Iraq, in its October 2007 report. “Efforts by the Government of Iraq to find long-term and durable solutions for the mass displacement of the Iraqi population caused by the ongoing violence remained inadequate in the face of an ever-deepening humanitarian crisis. Having been forced to abandon their homes, many are living in dire conditions without access to adequate food supplies and basic services, with children being particularly vulnerable to disease.”[11]

What this vast insecurity means for stability is not widely considered in the United States, but it certainly is in Iraq. Opinion surveys consistently show majority support for two related matters: first, the Iraqi public blames the U.S. military for most of the extraordinary levels of violence, and, second, they want the U.S. troops out of Iraq.

In a major survey released in March 2007, for example, more than 80 percent of respondents said they witnessed violence; 53 percent said they knew someone injured or killed by violence. Fourteen percent said they had moved to avoid violence (which would translate to more than 3.5 million Iraqis displaced but still in the country). “Asked whom they blame most for the current violence in Iraq, far and away the most common answer—voiced by four in 10 Iraqis—is either U.S. and coalition forces (31 percent), or George W. Bush personally (nine percent). Al Qaeda and foreign *jihadi* fighters are cited by 18 percent,” the survey revealed, and even larger numbers—78 percent overall—oppose the presence of U.S. troops: “More than seven in 10 Shiites—and nearly all Sunni Arabs—think the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq is making security worse.”[12] Polls taken for the State Department and the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes in 2006 show similar results.[13] In a University of Michigan poll, one finding signals the wariness of Iraqis toward American motives: 76 percent thought the United States invaded to control oil; 41 percent to build U.S. military bases; 32 percent to help Israel.[14]

In light of the mortality surveys, mounting poverty, and the numbers of displaced, these attitudes should come as no surprise. Altogether they comprise a very compelling case of U.S. miscalculation—dealing with the incipient, then mounting, insurgency harshly, with an accelerating cycle of violence the grim result—that has fueled violence across a broad swath of Iraq, among virtually all groups, and with unrelenting consequences.

Those consequences have drawn in the neighbors to become active protectors of ethnic or sectarian kin, or, particularly in the case of Iran, to oppose a foreign occupation and protect its own interests in a country that has been a cruel rival for many years—call it Tehran's Monroe Doctrine. The violence begun by the U.S. invasion and occupation remains the proximate cause for obstreperousness or foot-dragging by all neighbors.

Much new thinking about Iraq in the independent panels, including the Baker-Hamilton group, hints at the need to reconsider the large U.S. deployments. The “surge” has reportedly brought down violence in Baghdad, but likely has, like a squeezed balloon, increased it elsewhere. And U.S. air strikes are up dramatically, by 400 percent this year, which are likely to increase civilian casualties and resentment.

The main political strategy of the Administration—conceivably, the only strategy—is to divert attention to Iran and Syria and Osama bin Laden as the bad actors who are the root and branch of all Iraq's woes. This shadow play obscures expert opinion here and abroad that agrees that any durable prospect for stability in Iraq must involve the neighbors through non-coercive diplomatic means, while reducing dramatically the U.S. “footprint” that is as much a spur to, as a hedge against, violence. But until we glimpse this harsh truth about the sources and consequences of violence, too many American elites, as Plato might say, will continue to fancy the shadows that they formerly saw as truer.

## About the Author

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3. Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (London: Hurst, 2006), 139-141; also see Nichole Argo, Workshop Summary Report, [Transnational Violence in the Persian Gulf](#), MIT Center for International Studies, April 20-21, 2006; and, also of interest, Alan B. Krueger, “[The National Origins of Foreign Fighters in Iraq](#),” paper presented at the American Economic Association Annual Meeting (2007). Krueger cites U.S. statistics of caught foreign fighters as follows: Egypt (78), Syria (66), Sudan (41), Saudi Arabia (32), Jordan (17), Iran (13), Palestine (12), and Tunisia (10).

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5. [Petraeus testimony](#), Op. Cit.
6. Krueger, [Op. Cit.](#), 4. The data are from Multi-National Force reports.
7. Tom Regan, "[The 'myth' of Iraq's foreign fighters](#)," *Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 23, 2005, cites several sources, including a 2005 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
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10. Magdi Abdelhadi, "[Iraq's displaced people nightmare](#)," *BBC News*, October 10, 2007. See also UNHCR reports on [ReliefWeb](#): the UN agency says 2.4 million refugees in "neighboring countries," and another 2.3 million inside Iraq, one million of whom were displaced before 2003. The large numbers of displaced, surely underestimated in these reports, is another indicator of mortality—it is highly unlikely that the displaced-to-dead ratio would be more than 10:1.
11. The Oxfam report is [Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq](#), July 2007, issued with the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq. The UN report is its *Human Rights Report* (October 11, 2007), 3-4.
12. "[Ebbing Hope in a Landscape of Loss](#)," March 12, 2007, poll conducted for *ABC News*, *BBC News*, *USA Today*, and others.
13. Amit R. Paley, "Most Iraqis Favor Immediate U.S. Pullout, Polls Show: Leaders' Views Out of Step With Public," [Washington Post](#), September 27, 2006, A22. A September 2006 State Department poll showed large majorities were opposed to U.S. presence. According to "The Iraqi Public on the U.S. Presence and the Future of Iraq," a WorldPublicOpinion.org (WPO) Poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), a joint program of the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and the Center on Policy Attitudes, in September 2006 suggested that the United States was provoking more violence than it is preventing. An article on the poll, "[Most Iraqis Want U.S. Troops Out Within a Year](#)," September 27, 2006, published by WPO noted that seven out of ten Iraqis wanted the United States out within year.
14. This poll was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. See: "[Iraqi attitudes: survey documents big change](#)," *UMich.edu*, June 14, 2006.