



What Iraqis Really Think

By Karl Zinsmeister

Until recently, U.S. policy toward Iraq has been handicapped by a lack of acknowledged support for the United States from the Iraqi people themselves. According to most news and media outlets, Iraqi public opinion toward the United States is negative, but a recent study commissioned by The American Enterprise and conducted by Zogby International, a well-known polling agency, indicates Iraqi support for a continued U.S. presence in the region.

America, some say, is hobbled in its policies toward Iraq by not knowing much about what Iraqis really think. Are they on the side of radical Islamists? What kind of government would they like? What is their attitude toward the United States? Do the Shiites hate us? Could Iraq become another Iran under the ayatollahs? Are the people in the Sunni triangle the real problem?

Up to now we have only been able to guess. We have relied on anecdotal temperature-takings of the Iraqi public and have been at the mercy of images presented to us by the press. We all know that journalists have a bad-news bias: 10,000 schools being rehabbed is not news; one school blowing up is a weeklong feeding frenzy. And some of us who have spent time recently in Iraq—I was an embedded reporter during the war—have been puzzled by the postwar news and media imagery, which is much more negative than what many individuals involved in reconstructing Iraq have been telling us.

Well, finally we have some evidence of where the truth may lie. Working with Zogby International survey researchers, *The American Enterprise*

magazine has conducted the first scientific poll of the Iraqi public. Given the state of the country, this was not easy. Security problems delayed our intrepid fieldworkers several times. We labored at careful translations, regional samplings, and survey methods to make sure our results would accurately reflect the views of Iraq's multifarious, long-suffering people. We consulted Eastern European pollsters about the best way to elicit honest answers from those conditioned to repress their true sentiments.

Conducted in August 2003, our survey was necessarily limited in scope, but it reflects a nationally representative sample of Iraqi views, as captured in four disparate cities: Basra (Iraq's second largest, home to 1.7 million people, in the far south), Mosul (third-largest, far north), Kirkuk (Kurdish-influenced oil city, fourth-largest), and Ramadi (a resistance hotbed in the Sunni triangle). The results show that the Iraqi public is more sensible, stable, and moderate than commonly portrayed, and that Iraq is not so fanatical, or resentful of the United States after all.

A "Manageable" Country

Iraqis are optimistic. Seven out of ten say they expect their country and their personal lives will be better five years from now. On both fronts, 32 percent say things will become much better.

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The toughest part of reconstructing their nation, Iraqis say by three-to-one, will be politics, not economics. They are nervous about democracy. Asked which is closer to their own view—"Democracy can work well in Iraq" or "Democracy is a Western way of doing things"—five out of ten said democracy is Western and will not work in Iraq. One in ten was not sure. And four out of ten said democracy could work in Iraq. There were interesting divergences. Sunnis were negative on democracy by more than two to one, but, critically, the majority Shiites were as likely to say democracy would work for Iraqis as not. People from ages eighteen to twenty-nine are much more rosy about democracy than other Iraqis, and women are significantly more positive than men.

Asked to name one country they would most like Iraq to model its new government on from five possibilities—neighboring Baathist Syria; neighbor and Islamic monarchy Saudi Arabia; neighbor and Islamist republic Iran; Arab lodestar Egypt; or the United States—the most popular model, by far, was the United States. The United States was preferred as a model by 37 percent of Iraqis selecting from those five—more than Syria, Iran and Egypt put together. Saudi Arabia was in second place at 28 percent. Again, there were important demographic splits. Younger adults are especially favorable toward the United States, and Shiites are more admiring than Sunnis. Interestingly, Iraqi Shiites, coreligionists with Iranians, do not admire Iran's Islamist government; the United States is six times as popular with them as a model for governance.

Our interviewers inquired whether Iraq should have an Islamic government, or instead let all people practice their own religion. Only 33 percent want an Islamic government; a solid 60 percent say "no." A vital detail: Shiites (whom Western reporters frequently portray as self-flagellating maniacs) are least receptive to the idea of an Islamic government, saying no by 66 percent to 27 percent. It is only among the minority Sunnis that there is interest in a religious state, and they are split evenly on the question.

Perhaps the strongest indication that an Islamic government will not be part of Iraq's future: the nation is thoroughly secularized. We asked how often our respondents had attended the Friday prayer over the previous month. Fully 43 percent said "never." It is time to scratch "Khomeini II" from the list of morbid fears.

You can also cross out "Osama II": 57 percent of Iraqis with an opinion have an unfavorable view of Osama bin Laden, with 41 percent of those saying it is a very unfavorable view. (Women are especially down on him.) Except in the Sunni triangle (where the limited support that exists for

bin Laden is heavily concentrated), negative views of the al Qaeda supremo are actually quite lopsided in all parts of the country. And those opinions were collected before Iraqi police announced it was al Qaeda members who killed worshipers with a truck bomb in Najaf.

And you can write off the possibility of a Baath revival. We asked: "Should Baath Party leaders who committed crimes in the past be punished or should past actions be put behind us?" A thoroughly unforgiving Iraqi public stated by 74 percent to 18 percent that Saddam's henchmen should be punished.

This new evidence on Iraqi opinion suggests the country is manageable. If the small number of militants conducting sabotage and murder inside the country can gradually be eliminated by American troops (this is already happening), then the mass of citizens living along the Tigris-Euphrates Valley are likely to make reasonably sensible use of their new freedom. "We will not forget it was the U.S. soldiers who liberated us from Saddam," said Abid Ali, an auto-repair shop owner in Sadr City last month—and our research shows that he is not unrepresentative.

None of this is to suggest that the task ahead will be simple. Inchoate anxiety toward the United States showed up when we asked Iraqis if they thought the United States would help or hurt Iraq over a five-year period. Fifty percent to 36 percent chose hurt over help. This is fairly understandable; Iraqis have just lived through a war in which Americans were (necessarily) flinging most of the ammunition. These experiences may explain why women (who are more antimilitary in all cultures) show up in our data as especially wary of the United States right now. War is never pleasant, though U.S. forces made heroic efforts to spare innocents in this one, as I illustrate with firsthand examples in my book about the battles.

Evidence of the comparative gentleness of this war can be seen in our poll. Less than 30 percent of our sample of Iraqis knew or heard of anyone killed in the spring fighting. Meanwhile, fully half knew some family member, neighbor or friend who had been killed by Iraqi security forces during the years Saddam held power.

Perhaps the ultimate indication of how comfortable Iraqis are with America's aims in their region came when we asked how long they would like to see American and British forces remain in their country: Six months? One year? Two years or more? Two-thirds of those with an opinion urged that the coalition troops should stick around for at least another year. We are making headway in a benighted part of the world. Hang in there, America.