

Rep. Woolsey Sept. 15, 2005 Iraq Hearing
Testimony of Anas Shallal, Iraqi-American Peace Activist

I want to thank Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey for holding these very important hearings about Iraq and lending a voice to the millions of people here in the United States and in Iraq who believe that there is a better way.

Iraqi Americans for Peaceful Alternatives is an ad hoc group that formed shortly before the invasion of Iraq to look for alternatives to war. Our concern was two fold. As Iraqis we felt the need to address the concern of the Iraqi people – our relatives and friends – and at the same time as Americans to hold our newly adopted country to the democratic values that we cherish and that had brought us to its shores.

Let me start by saying that I believe that the Iraqi people still want to see the US play a constructive role in helping Iraq heal from decades of oppression and tyranny. They still believe that the United States has the capability to help Iraq transition into a country that respects the rule of law, values human rights and provides for its citizens' needs.

One thing is certain - that most Iraqis want to see the US occupation end. A recent Zogby poll shows that 69% of Shiia and 82% of Sunnis want to see an immediate withdrawal of US troops with a specified timeline. The Iraqi President Jalal Talabani in an interview with the Washington Post last Monday stated that US troops can start withdrawing in the next few months and 50,000 of them can be out by year's end. In late 2003 the pentagon announced that it will draw down the number of US troops in Iraq to 105,000 by May of 2004. Yet today we have 138,000 US troops. August of 2005 is the 4th largest casualty month for US troops in Iraq, with 85 US fatalities.

The war is entering its 31st month. In May of 2003 we were told that major combat operations were over. We went into this war with Iraq searching for weapons of mass destruction – although most Iraqis wanted the removal of Saddam Hussein as their primary goal.

When no weapons were found –President Bush declared mission accomplished, only to change course and continue with a new mission: Bringing democracy to the Iraqi people. This mission has yet to be clearly defined. There is no timetable. There are no clear goals. How can the Iraqi people trust the US and its intentions? What would stop the US from altering its mission yet again?

Iraqis are asking, does bringing democracy mean writing a constitution and holding an election? If so does that mean the withdrawal of US troops will commence by year's end? Does the constitution have to represent the ethnic and religious makeup of Iraq? What role must religion play in this new constitution? How much meddling should the US employ in the process of writing the constitution? Is the democracy we are bringing to Iraq – a homegrown, grassroots effort that will empower and unite the Iraqi people, or is it a democracy that will codify the tyranny of the majority and deepen fissures and divisions between the fragile ethnic and sectarian lines that define Iraqi's very identity. What will this new constitution do to the rights of women under a strict interpretation of Islamic law as stated in Article 2a for example?

Just a few weeks away from a historic referendum on the constitution and there is yet a consensus on the key elements, thus paving the way for further division. Just as the elections that took place in Iraq where millions of Iraqi citizens were prevented from

making their voices heard due to abysmal security conditions and lack of information, the constitution is proving to be another such milestone. Most Sunnis and many Shiia are intent on rejecting the constitution in its current form opting for a more representative constitution that preserves the unity of Iraq.

Today the situation in Iraq is very dire. Iraq, once known as the cradle of civilization has become the cradle of terrorism. A breeding ground for terrorists if you will. The security situation ranks among the highest concerns for ordinary Iraqis. Last month alone, according to Faiq Amin Bakr, the director of Baghdad's central morgue there were 880 violent deaths – a city of 5 million people – compared to NY a city of 8 million people where they average about 45 homicides per month – (these figures exclude deaths through car bombings and suicide attacks which would add another 100 to the number).

According to the interior ministry over 5000 Iraqis were kidnapped between December 2003 and April 2005. Additionally 228 foreign nationals have been kidnapped since the beginning of the war (with many of these kidnappings resulting in death). A close relative of mine – a 14 year old young boy – was kidnapped last year on his way to school. He was taken from the taxi which was ferrying him. His parents had hired a driver to make sure that their son stays out of harm's way. The demands for ransom came at the end of the day through a cell phone call. The abductors left a return phone number to call when the money is ready. They were told that they would never see their son again if they reported the incident and clearly had little concern for the authorities. His family had to endure a surrealistic nightmare negotiating the release of their child. He was dropped off at his home's door steps four days later badly beaten and bruised physically and mentally.

Additionally, other basic human needs are not yet met. Electricity is still at an all time low – with spotty service at best in many cities including Baghdad. Clean water is available to less than 30% of the population – according to a report from Baghdad University. Gas lines stretch for a mile at a time with many people spending the night in their cars in order to get gas. A cousin relays a story of having to sleep in his car with a machine gun at his side to get gas for the family generator. They have to siphon the gas from the tank because the use of containers is prohibited. It is hard to imagine such conditions when Iraq sits on the second largest proven reserve of oil in the world.

A recent report by the International Monetary Fund indicates that the economic situation in Iraq is stalling at best, largely due to gross misappropriation of funds and the abysmal security conditions – security makes up nearly 50% of reconstruction costs. Unemployment is at 30-40% and in some areas much higher. Inflation is through the roof with nearly 30% for last year alone.

On the health front, Iraqis have had to endure worsening conditions. Nearly all Iraqis receive food rations and malnutrition is at an all time high with half the children under the age of 5 are malnourished. A recent study points out that infant mortality is at 10% of live births. Furthermore, urgent care is sorely lacking for those with acute health conditions. Hospitals face a critical shortage of much needed medicine and supplies. Recently during a sandstorm, a relative relayed to me a story of a local hospital crammed with nearly 200 patients seeking help for breathing ailments only to be confronted with the use of only two operational oxygen tanks.

Prisons and detention facilities such as Abu Ghraib and others are overflowing with Iraqi detainees – currently there are over 14,000 prisoners of which less than 100 are foreign nationals – debunking the idea that many insurgents are of foreign nationalities.

These conditions that I just mentioned have created an environment that is ideal for those seeking to polarize Iraq and create further division among the many sectarian and religious communities.

I lay out some of these facts because they are important to understand the insurgency and the proverbial oxygen that it craves.

Iraqis are pessimistic about the situation in Iraq today. According to the International Republican Institute survey of July 2005, less than half the population believes that Iraq is heading in the right direction and this number has dropped dramatically in the last several months. While we, here in the US are focused on the writing of the constitution, Iraqis are generally oblivious to that issue.

When Iraqis are asked what is the most important issue of concern to you? – The matter of writing an acceptable constitution comes dead last. At the top of the list is electricity, adequate housing, jobs, inflation, security etc.

Nearly three years after the invasion of Iraq, the insurgency is still as forceful as ever. Yet little is being done to head it off. For every road that is being built, another is being destroyed. For every home that has gone up, another is bombed from the air. The insurgency has been able to meld into various forms and has received tacit if not direct support from locals in some cases.

Overcoming the insurgency or resistance as it is called by some is a complicated and multifaceted task. The term “crushing” is often used. This is a military term that encompasses a military solution. By its very definition crushing an insurgency is a counterproductive and oftentimes futile effort. Insurgencies thrive under oppressive conditions. Most experts agree that countering an insurgency requires a strategy that wins “the hearts and minds” of the people - something we have not managed to do very well. Rather than crushing an insurgency, we have to focus more on diffusing it. However, diffusing an insurgency requires political solutions. According to Saleh al Mutlaq of the National Dialogue Council, opening a dialogue with so called insurgents would suck the oxygen out of the insurgency and diminish the numbers of those being recruited.

The occupation of Iraq, by most estimates, has done little in that regard and has in fact provided the very fuel that has not only emboldened the insurgency, but in fact increased its potency.

For instance, the attack and siege of Falluja (a city of over 250,000) from April of 2004 through November 2004, has caused 616 civilian deaths according to Iraq Body Count, forcing most residents to flee and many becoming homeless. More recently and equally detrimental is the assault on Tall Afar, a similar city, a city the size of Louisville, has shown mixed results at best in netting insurgents, foreign fighters or wanted criminals. In September of 2004, the newly appointed mayor of the city announced that Tall Afar is on its way to becoming a great city once again after 150,000 residents fled out of fear of an imminent US attack. A year later Tall Afar is a ghost town. Just days

ago, another siege on the city left the remaining residents bewildered and angry at the US military and the Iraqi troops that accompanied them. Again very few insurgents were found. Commanders proclaimed the relative lack of resistance a sign of the success of the operation, in which at least a dozen people were killed and many rounded up, the vast majority of them Iraqi. Maybe a success by military standards but not a good formula for winning hearts and minds.

In each case, heavy and sometimes indiscriminate air bombardment has caused the death of many innocents. In each case, a strategy of pacification was employed and in each case, the resistance became fiercer and more entrenched. Why? Because when you kill innocent people – when you destroy someone's home – when you create conditions that make life not worth living – such as cutting off water or electricity or access to hospitals – you leave people little option but to join some kind of resistance. In other words, my enemy's enemy becomes my friend. Not exactly a winning formula for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people.

A recent Dossier of Civilian Casualties produced by Iraq Body Count indicated that nearly 25,000 civilians have been killed in just the first 2 years of this war. Over 9,000 of those killed were killed by US air bombardments, many of whom are children and women. Each one of those killed is a relative of someone – he or she is the mother, father, daughter, son, cousin, brother, sister, or relative or friend of someone.

Every Iraqi you ask about the insurgency will tell you that they are a mixed bag. In a sense we have adopted the current language. Mixed bag is a code word for “we don't have a clue”. In other words, no one really knows. Let's take the issue of suicide bombings – a new phenomenon in Iraq. Most Iraqis will say that suicide bombing is not an Iraqi trait. Thus suicide bombers must be outsiders. As if suicide bombers have a genetic disposition to blowing themselves up.

There are some things that are obvious however. Most Iraqis do agree that the insurgency or resistance has been fed by the many missteps of the coalition forces. Most would agree that the ensuing chaos following the fall of Baghdad was foretelling of further chaos down the road. Many would agree that much of the looting and destruction was allowed to spiral in the presence of US troops. Their suspicion was not alleviated by the fact that the ministry of oil was well protected throughout. They could not understand why the world's mightiest power chose not to stop the anarchy.

Most experts, military and otherwise, would agree that disbanding the military and army at the onset without jobs or guarantees for a decent life created a powder keg for future violence. Most Iraqis would agree that neighboring foreign governments have contributed to the insurgency to benefit their own agenda at the expense of the Iraqi people. Many Iraqis would agree that criminal elements are benefiting handsomely from the chaos and lack of police and government presence through kidnapping, extortion and other criminal activity.

Despite all these elements, there is a genuine resistance movement in Iraq and by many accounts it's growing. Their case is easily made in the context of a desperate and deprived population who see the US as an imperialist power intent on usurping Arab land and Iraq's wealth. These groups find much support within the Iraqi populace and have been able to capitalize on US missteps. With the current economic situation it is not difficult to see the disparity between the haves and the have nots further feeding into the

profiteering dimensions of this occupation. Many government officials are well protected within the Green Zone and only leave their fort with a huge motorcade – usually accompanied by US armored vehicles - creating chaos and disrupting traffic throughout Baghdad. Those who are within the Green Zone are seen as out of touch with the Iraqi people and are more representative of coalition interests rather than those of the Iraqi people. The Green Zone has also become synonymous with the color of money. Those who reside or work within the Zone are rewarded handsomely – those who live outside are left to fend for themselves, having to endure the hardships I outlined earlier.

It is important to understand that when Iraqis speak of occupation, they are not only referring to military occupation but also to economic occupation as well - The occupation of Iraq's resources and the privatization of Iraqi companies. So as we are speaking in this hearing regarding an end to the military occupation we have to couple that with the end of abuse and misuse of Iraq's wealth in the hands of a few rich companies who have benefited greatly with little oversight or accountability. Iraq's wealth and treasure should be for the Iraqi people and the Iraqi people alone. The military shock and awe coupled with the economic shock and awe has been nothing short of a shocking and awful outcome for the people of Iraq.

When US troops entered Baghdad in April of 2003, they were welcomed by Iraqis who gave out a collective sigh of relief for the end of Saddam Hussein's decades of tyranny and oppression. But like the proverbial fish's head that stinks after 3 days – let's not overstay our visit and let's call for the withdrawal of all US troops and war profiteers by the end of the third year of the occupation. Let's call for April 9th, 2006 Iraq's true independence day.

Respectfully submitted by,
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