Letter from Iraq

Michael Kleinman

> We're here 'cause Bush is a cavalier cowboy who doesn't know when to cut his loses on a bad investment, the war here. Those who live inside the wire think we're making a difference. Those who leave the wire on a normal basis for patrols or firefights know better. Nothing has changed. This place will never change.
>
> In the long run, it don't matter. Just do your mission to the best of your ability. Terrorism is an idea and people [like the person above] are defeated. Don't be that guy. Stand up against terrorism now so our children onward don't.
>
> (Graffiti in a latrine at a Forward Operating Base in northern Iraq.)

The policeman had begun to yell – a curious, soundless performance to watch from inside the car, his words muffled by the bullet-proof glass. He gestured again, demanding that we get out of the vehicle; bad, albeit heavily-armed mime. He was dressed in camouflage, his face hidden behind a balaclava, wearing a cowboy hat that looked like it had been misplaced by the Village People, or perhaps stolen from Barbara Streisand's closet. The humour in his appearance was somewhat undercut by the fact that he was both armed and increasingly angry – though, thankfully, he hadn't yet reached the point of releasing the safety on his weapon.

Most of the time the Iraqi police and army units simply waved us through the various checkpoints scattered in and around the Mosul – the security officers sitting in the front seat of our vehicle would flash their identification through the window and off we would go. And then sometimes the script would change, the policeman would shake his head and demand the window be rolled down, or the door opened. A request always answered by a polite shake of the head from inside the car – open windows not being noted for their ability to deflect gunfire. And then an escalation of sorts, angry motions to pull the car to the side of the road, followed by a conversation conducted mostly in mime.

Fifteen minutes on the side of the road as the cowboy-hatted policeman and his colleagues radioed up the chain of command for instructions, descriptions of the

car and occupants broadcast over an open channel to anyone who cared to listen. And the possibility that the police at the checkpoint might have rather more complicated allegiances as well – delaying our vehicle in order to alert insurgents further along the road. A frightening thought in a city where on some roads the IED craters appeared every twenty or fifty meters. Yet, nothing to do but sit in the car and wait, trying not to count the minutes.

And then suddenly it was over as quickly as it started, the policeman waving for us to go. The car lurched forward and we continued down the road.

The recent news out of Iraq has been positive or relatively positive – the last few months have seen a sharp decline in Iraqi civilian fatalities, from 2,076 killed in January to 758 in October, according to the Iraqi Ministry of Health. [1] US casualties have also fallen, with fewer US troops killed in October than any month since March, 2006. [2] The question remains, however, as to what these figures indicate – and in particular whether they indicate that the situation is starting to stabilize, and even improve.

The war in Iraq can only be understood as an overlapping series of conflicts, with various groups arrayed in a constantly changing pattern of temporary alliances. A truth proved recently in Anbar Province, where the US military is now cooperating with Sunni tribes against al-Qaeda – the same tribes which a year ago supported al-Qaeda. These tribes have switched allegiances not out of a change of sentiment, but instead a calculated sense of their own advantage; a chance for American support in the face of a potentially hostile Shi'ite Government in Baghdad, coupled with a growing sense of grievance against a foreign-dominated al-Qaeda structure which has grown ever more arrogant and assertive.

The attempt to divine the course of the war is made all the more difficult by the nature of counter-insurgency itself. A counter-insurgency campaign cannot be reduced to newspaper maps charting ever-shifting front lines. Instead, the question is how to create and maintain stability and control over an area, and then how to expand that stability and control so as to deprive insurgents of safe-havens from which to operate. To that end, the military's current counter-insurgency strategy is often described as clear, hold and build, the goal of which is 'to clear areas from insurgent control, to hold them securely, and to build durable, national Iraqi institutions.' [3]

Yet this begs an even more fundamental question – in an environment as fluid and shifting as Iraq today, how does one begin to measure stability? Is stability measured simply by a decrease in casualties, or are casualty figures simply part of a much more complicated equation?

Determining success in light of casualty figures alone risks ignoring the last and perhaps most difficult aspect of our counter-insurgency doctrine – not just clearing and holding territory, but building durable Iraqi institutions capable of creating and maintaining stability long after US forces have left. Especially given the fact that, even with the surge, there simply aren't enough US troops to cover Baghdad, let alone the entire country.

Yet effective Iraqi institutions – from the military to the police to civilian ministries – depend on a functioning Iraqi government. In turn, a functional Iraqi government depends on the main political actors reaching a viable political reconciliation that cuts across religious and ethnic lines, giving Shi'ites and Sunnis, Arabs and Kurds a stake in its success.

The purpose of the surge itself was to help create 'breathing space' for the main political actors in Iraq to achieve just this kind of compromise. As President Bush said when explaining the rationale behind the surge: 'I've made clear to the Prime Minister and Iraq's other leaders that America's commitment is not open-ended. If the Iraqi government does not follow through on its promises, it will lose the support of the American people…Now is the time to act.' [4]

The drop in casualty figures – both Iraqi and American – is certainly welcome news, but it is bound to be fleeting in the absence of political progress of the kind described by the President.

And I wish I had an answer as to whether that political progress is possible, but I do not. I've spent the past six months in Iraq, yet like most people here, I have only a rabbit's view of the conflict – a view circumscribed by the contours of my work and shaped by my own daily routines. I live on a Forward Operating Base in northern Iraq, working for an organization helping to implement a USAID-funded development program, trying to improve the economic situation in selected Iraqi communities. Every once in a while a mortar lands near the base, usually off in the middle distance, and then occasionally closer, when the ground shakes. And I'm able to rationalize away that fear – to convince myself of the staggeringly small odds

that a mortar round will land nearby. I find it much more difficult, however, to calm the fear I feel on nights before we leave the base, travelling across the province to meet with various Iraqi leaders and US military commanders – nights when I lay awake in bed, trying to ignore an overly-active imagination.

And the thing is, I lead an incredibly sheltered life here on the base, while every day our Iraqi staff take risks I can barely comprehend, working to implement our various development projects. As one of our staff recently said, 'I can no longer bear this...I expect, whenever I leave home to visit a project that I will be the next...On last Sunday, a vehicle all of a sudden stopped on the other side of the road, a young man with plastic handcuffs was dragged out from the boot of the vehicle and shot in front of my eyes.'

Moments when I realise that political progress and institution building are not mere theoretical abstractions, but the difference between surviving the daily commute to work, or not. And I hope that my work makes a difference, but at the end of the day I'm not sure.

My encounter with the policeman sometimes feels like a microcosm of the conflict as a whole – the difficulty of determining friend and foe, and even more the distance that still needs to be travelled before we can boast of creating effective Iraqi institutions. It certainly doesn't bode well when every policeman is a potential insurgent, and when the windows always stay up.

Michael Kleinman recently returned from Iraq, where he worked for an organization implementing a USAID development program.

References

Bush, George W. (2007) 'President's Address to the Nation,' January 10, available at:
http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html

Parker, Ned (2007) 'Iraqi civilian deaths plunge,' Los Angeles Times, November 1.

Rice, Condoleezza (2005) 'Opening Remarks before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,' October 19, available at:
http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/55303.htm

Notes

[1] Parker 2007.

[2] Parker 2007.

[3] Rice 2005.

[4] Bush 2007.