



(U) Iraq -- Beyond the Headlines

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Run Date: 08/23/2005

(U) What's the real situation in Iraq? And what can we do about it?

(U) Having been back from Iraq for a couple of months now, I can easily understand why people were and are always asking me how it was "over there," was I scared, why are we staying there, is it really getting better, and would you go back. I watch the news like everyone else, but I know that there is so much more going on that just doesn't make the cut. I consider myself lucky to have been there, to have seen things firsthand, to have gained a better understanding of what our government is doing over there, and most importantly to see the impact of SIGINT on operations.

(U) When I am asked how it was or if I was scared I often have to stop and think about it. Indeed there were some scary moments - it is a war zone after all - but I honestly wasn't living in fear. It is amazing how quickly you adapt to your environment and indeed most of the time the ongoing actions were more of an annoyance, primarily because our workday or sleep were interrupted! Unfortunately the news is filled with the latest ugliness and there is very little else covered, so it seems like the threat is even worse than it really is. While the death and destruction are indeed horrendous, there is a lot of life and living going on despite it all. It is amazing to drive through the streets and view normal everyday bustle, just like in any other major city.

(S) In response to the questions about staying the course and improving/degrading conditions, I find that easy to answer. I had the opportunity to work closely with several Iraqis, was included in briefings on the US and Multinational Forces-Iraq training and rebuilding plans, and I was there during that very historic January election. What an amazing place and people. Unfortunately they have neither the background nor the tools to go it alone as they try to create their own sovereign nation. It no longer matters whether we were right or wrong to go into the country, we are there and they need and, more importantly, want our help. It is going to take time and patience, but they want us beside them as they build their future.

(U) The changes I saw following Election Day were amazing. The resolve of the people shone through and they have repeatedly demonstrated their determination to participate in the creation of their own nation. Many risk their lives everyday as they go to work, particularly if they are working for their government or for our forces. If you pay attention to the stories below the headlines you will see that so many of the targets are police or people who are working towards a constitutional government. Despite it all, they stay the course and the lines of volunteers for police and military duty grow longer, not shorter.

(U) There are also positive signs of improvement if you pay attention to who is carrying out security actions and activities. More and more checkpoints are Iraqi manned, more and more cordons and raids are being conducted by Iraqi units. The news makes it sound like the fighting between religious sects is something that can't be overcome. While it is not going to go away, it is important to know that throughout the government - military, police, policy makers, ministries etc. - folks from all sects are working together towards what they view as a common goal, a free and safe Iraq. There is no division between Shia, Sunni, Kurd, Christian, etc. when it comes to these efforts and yet you seldom see anything in the news that points to how well they are working together. There will always be those who are unhappy and will use whatever angle to make their point, but as was pointed out to me by an Iraqi - multi-cultures/religions live together peacefully around the world and they have done the same in Iraq and will continue to do so.

(S//SI) When asked if I would go back the answer is always yes. This was the best professional experience I have ever had. Seeing firsthand the implementation of many different SIGINT capabilities, helping to facilitate those, identifying new opportunities, and watching actions move forward with minimal delay were all exhilarating. Most rewarding though were the opportunities to work closely with a huge group of professionals back at headquarters who provided me with incredible technical and emotional support, and to work directly with an extremely dedicated group of professionals, US and Iraqi, on the ground in Iraq.

(S//SI) Most of us know that SIGINT makes a difference at some level. It all came together for me when a senior officer with the task force responsible for acting on the intelligence stated "When I have SIGINT I have a 90% plus success rate of rolling up legitimate targets, without it I am right maybe 40% of the time. I can't afford to risk our soldiers lives for a 'catch and release' program - I need SIGINT." I've never heard a better-defined impact statement and every SIGINTer should be very proud of that accomplishment because it is the result of **EVERYONE's** hard work.

(S//SI) It takes all of us, regardless of skill community, to make SIGINT the best it can be. Iraq is an excellent example of where it all comes together. The headlines show us all of the bad that continues there, but indeed things are getting better and SIGINT plays a key role in both securing the country so that the Iraqi people can regain control, and in providing information on how well they are doing. Not every one of us can or will go to Iraq but being on the front end, in any of the myriad positions, gives you an even greater sense of what is going on, beyond the headlines.

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