

Prepared Testimony of Nir Rosen Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

The Bush administration and the US military have stopped talking of Iraq as a grand project of nation building, the American media have dutifully obeyed, and they too have abandoned any larger narrative, presenting Iraq as a series of small pieces. Just as Iraq is being physically deconstructed so too is it being intellectually deconstructed, not as a state undergoing transition but as small stories of local heroes and villains, of well meaning American soldiers, of good news here and progress there. But the whole, in this case, is less than the sum of its parts.

In May 2002 the newly arrived American proconsul for Iraq, Paul Bremer, promulgated an edict that unceremoniously disbanded the former ruling Baath Party as well as the Iraqi Army, police and other security services. Hundreds of thousands of men were left jobless and Iraqis began to perceive the Americans as occupiers, not liberators. The ideologues behind this war believed Iraq was a state in which Sunni Muslims ruled Shiite Muslims. Most Muslims in the world are Sunnis. Shiites, a majority in Iraq and Iran, descend from a dispute over who should lead the Muslim community. Iraq has no history of serious sectarian violence or civil war between the two groups, and most Iraqis viewed themselves as Iraqis first, then Muslims, with their sects having only personal importance. Intermarriage was widespread and indeed most Iraqi tribes were divided between Sunnis and Shiites. The Baath party which ruled Iraq for four decades had a majority Shiite membership. And the Iraqi Army, though a non sectarian institution that predated the coming of the Baathists, was also majority Shiite, even in its officer corps.

But the American ideologues who saw themselves as liberators needed an evil worthy of their lofty self image. To them the Baath party was a Sunni Nazi party that ruled Shiite Jews. They would de-Baathify just as their role models had de-Nazified. Sunnis were suspect of loyalty to the former regime and as a result the American military adopted a more aggressive posture in majority Sunni areas, resulting in clashes in places like Falluja that indeed led to the formation of a powerful popular resistance. Sunnis were weakened by the fact that Saddam, a Sunni himself, from attaining too much popularity or power, to avoid rivals. Sunni Muslims also lacked any charismatic religious leaders who could represent the community. Shiite Islam on the other hand has an established hierarchy with only a few key clerical leaders that Shiites can follow.

Today Iraq does not exist. It has no government. It is like Somalia, different fiefdoms controlled by warlords and their militias. I have spent most of the last five years since April 2003 in Iraq, with Iraqis, focusing on their militias, mosques and other true centers of power. Events in the Green Zone or International Zone were never important, because power was in the street since April 2003. When the Americans overthrew Saddam and created a power vacuum, massive looting followed. That first month of Occupation there was enormous hope, but the looting created an atmosphere of pervasive lawlessness from which Iraq never recovered. The entire state infrastructure was destroyed and there were no security forces, Iraqi or American, to give people a sense of safety. They quickly turned to inchoate militias being formed, often along religious, tribal and ethnic lines.

Those same militias dominate Iraq today. This would have happened anywhere. If you removed the government in New York City, where I am from, and removed the police, and allowed for the state infrastructure to be looted and then you dismissed the state bureaucracy you would see the same thing happen. Soon Jewish gangs would fight Puerto Rican gangs and Haitian gangs would fight Albanian gangs.

The most powerful militias belong to Shiites who rallied around populist symbols such as Muqtada al Sadr. The Americans then fired the entire state bureaucracy, and for some Shiite leaders, this was an opportunity to seize control. While many Sunni clerical and tribal leaders chose to boycott the occupation and its institutions, many of their Shiite counterparts made a devil's bargain and collaborated. The Americans maintained their sectarian approach, unaware that they were alienating a large part of Iraqi society and pitting one group against the other. Most of the armed resistance to the occupation was dominated by Sunnis, who boycotted the first elections, effectively voting themselves out of Iraqi politics. Radical Sunni militants began to attack Shiites in revenge or to provoke a civil war and disrupt the American project. Sectarian fundamentalist Shiite parties dominated the government and security forces and punished Sunnis en masse. By 2005 the civil war started. Later that year the Americans realized they had to bring Sunnis into the fold, but it was too late, the Shiites in power saw no reason to share it.

Millions of refugees and internally displaced Iraqis fled their homes, while tens of thousands died in the fighting. But by 2007 it was clear the Shiites had won. The Americans began to realize they were empowering the Iraqi allies of Iran, the next target in their plans for a "new Middle East." They also felt the pressure from Sunni Arab dictators in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, the so called "moderates," who feared Iran's populist and anti imperialist message, its support for groups such as Hamas and Hizballah who resisted Israel and made the "moderates" look like sell outs.

The Bush administration was also feeling pressure on the home front. The war was unwinnable and unpopular. Victory was an empty and undefined term and the motives for the war were constantly changing. In 2007, when most reasonable observers were calling for a reduction of American troops and an eventual withdrawal, the Bush administration decided to increase the troops instead. The immediate impact was nothing, and since it began nearly a million Iraqis fled their homes, mostly from Baghdad, and Baghdad became a Shiite city. So one of the main reason less people are being killed is because there are less people to kill. This is a key to understanding the drop in violence. Shiites were cleansed from Sunni areas and Sunnis were cleansed from Shiite areas. Militias consolidated their control over fiefdoms. The violence in Iraq was not senseless, it was meant to displace the enemy's population. And if war is politics by other means, then the Shiites won, they now control Iraq. Fortunately for the planners of the new strategy, events in the Iraqi civil war were working in their favor. The Sunnis had lost. They realized they could no longer fight the Americans and the Shiites, and many decided to side with the Americans, especially because many Sunnis identified their Shiite enemy with Iran, America's sworn enemy as well. The Americans armed both sides in the civil war. David Kilcullen, the influential Australian counter insurgency advisor, defined it as "balancing competing armed interest groups." Though supporters of the war touted the

surge as a success, they forgot that tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Iraqis who have been killed, the millions displaced, and the thousands of dead and wounded Americans just so that violence could go back to the still horrifying levels of just a couple of years ago.

At the same time that the Sunnis were realizing they had lost the civil war, Muqtada al Sadr realized his militia was out of his control, and he feared its clashes with Americans, Sunnis and fellow Shiites would threaten his own power. Moreover he knew that his militia was the main target for the increased American troops. So he imposed a “freeze,” often mistranslated as a ceasefire his powerful militia so that he could “reform” it. The Americans had declared that the Mahdi Army would be targeted so the Mahdi Army largely withdrew to wait for the eventual reduction in American troops. The Mahdi Army was also ill disciplined and out of control, so Muqtada took advantage of the opportunity to consolidate control of his men and root out the unruly ones. When the Mahdi Army Freeze began there was an immediate and huge drop in violence, which shows just how responsible they were for the violence.

At the same time the Sunni militias imposed their own ceasefire. They had been battling the Americans, the Shiite and al Qaeda and failed on all fronts. Resistance to the occupation had not succeeded in liberating Iraq or in seizing power or overthrowing the government. The Shiite militias had won the civil war and Sunnis were being purged from Baghdad and from the Iraqi state. Most of the Iraqi refugees were also Sunnis. Al Qaeda, which initially had been useful in protecting Sunni areas from the Americans and the Shiites was now out of control, imposing a reign of terror in Sunni areas. As a result Sunni militiamen began to cooperate with the Americans against al Qaeda. Members of the Sunni resistance who fought the Americans and engaged in organized crime grew weary of the radicals in the Anbar province who undermined traditional authority figures and harmed their smuggling routes and highway robbery and rebelled against them. These new militias, called Awakening groups, Sons of Iraq, Concerned Local Citizens, Critical Infrastructure Security Guards and Iraqi Security Volunteers are largely former insurgents who have shifted tactics. This tactic worked best in the Anbar province and has partially worked in Baghdad, though many Iraqis fear that al Qaeda has imposed its own ceasefire and is lying low to avoid its enemies. In the very violent Diyala and Mosul provinces the Anbar model has so far not succeeded. Like the Mahdi Army, the Sunni militias hope to wait for the Americans to reduce their troop levels before they resume fighting Shiite militias. Joining these American backed militias has given them territory in Baghdad and elsewhere that they now control. These Sunni militias also have political goals and are attempting to unite to become a larger movement that will be able to regain Sunni territory and effectively fight the Shiite militias and the Shiite dominated government, which they call an “Iranian Occupation.”

These Awakening groups are paid by the US military and operated in much of the country, employing former fighters and often empowering them, to the consternation of the Shiite dominated government as well as the Shiite militias, who thought they had defeated the Sunnis, just to see them trying to regain power through the backdoor. So although militias and an irrelevant central government were among the main problems in

Iraq, the Americans were creating new militias. They called it “Iraq solutions for Iraqi problems.” By accepting money from the Americans, Sunni militiamen rid themselves of the onerous Americans as well. The Americans think they have purchased Sunni loyalty, but in fact it is the Sunnis who have bought the Americans, describing it as a temporary ceasefire with the American occupation so that they can regroup to fight the “Iranian occupation,” which is how they refer to the Shiite dominated government and security forces.

In both cases, the militiamen are chafing under the restrictions placed on them. The Mahdi Army fighters are losing power on the street since they have withdrawn. They are frustrated that the Americans still target them for arrests and that security forces loyal to rival Shiite militias such as the Badr militia are also targeting them. They worry about the creation and empowerment of new Sunni militias. Some Mahdi Army groups ignore the ceasefire or reject Muqtada al Sadr’s command, others merely grow impatient and hope to confront the Americans and the Sunnis once again. Sunni militiamen were promised that twenty percent of them would be integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces. This has not happened. Instead they clash regularly with Iraqi Security Forces and are rejected by the Government of Iraq. Often the Americans are late in paying them as well. They increasingly feel humiliated and threaten to resume fighting. The American military cannot for much longer sustain the increased number of troops it has in Iraq. It will be forced to reduce its numbers. When this occurs and there is increased space for Sunni and Shiite militias to operate in, they will resume fighting for control over Baghdad and its environs. The Government of Iraq is dominated by sectarian Shiite Islamist parties. They also dominate the security forces which often targeted Sunni civilians for cleansing. The Government and Security Forces also worry about the empowered Sunni militias who they will one day have to fight again. As we saw last week, rival Shiite militias are also bitter enemies. The clashes throughout Shiite areas of Iraq were not between the Mahdi Army bad guys and the Iraqi government good guys. They were between more nationalist and populist, and popular, Shiite militias who reject the occupation and are opposed to federalism and on the other side the Shiite militias such as Badr who collaborate with the Americans and are competing for power, territory, resources and votes with the Mahdi Army. The Iraqi security forces are divided in their loyalties and hence the Iraqi Army units that fought in the south were recruited from areas where they were more likely to be loyal to the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council, formerly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and its Badr militia. As we saw, were it not for the American military and airforce, they could not have stood up to the Mahdi Army anyway. Muqtada’s Sadrist movement is the most popular movement in Iraq today and his militia is the most powerful one. The one bright spot in the recent increase in violence between Shiite militias is that it marks the end of the Sunni Shiite civil war. There will no longer be a Shiite bloc united in fighting Sunnis as there was in the past, when Badr and the Mahdi Army collaborated to expel and kill Sunnis. Now we may start to see cross sectarian alliances between militias.

Now thanks to the Americans the Sunnis, formerly on the run, are once again confident, and control their own territory. The Mahdi Army is consolidating its forces, ridding itself of unruly elements and waiting for the inevitable reduction in American troops. Iraqi

Security Forces will also be able to once again operate with impunity when there are less Americans present. Both sides are getting ready to resume fighting. Refugees International is concerned that when violence resumes there will be fewer options for displaced Iraqis. Syria and Jordan, the main safe havens for Iraqis in the first round of the civil war, have now virtually closed their borders to new Iraqis. Additionally, eleven of Iraq's eighteen provinces have closed their borders to internally displaced Iraqis. There will be nowhere to run to and as a result large scale massacres may occur.

Iraq remains an extremely unstable and failed state, with many years of bloodshed left before an equilibrium is attained. There is no reconciliation occurring between the two warring communities, and Shiites will not allow the territorial gains they made to be chipped away by Sunnis returning to their homes, or Sunni militias being empowered. Violence is slightly down in Iraq in large part because the goal of the violence, removing Sunnis from Shiite areas and Shiites from Sunni areas, has largely succeeded, and there are less people to kill. Baghdad and much of Iraq resemble Somalia. Warlords and their militiamen rule neighborhoods or towns. In many cases displaced Iraqis are joining these militias. There is no serious process of reconciliation occurring between the communities. Armed groups are preparing for the next phase of the conflict. Shiites will not allow the gains they made to be chipped away by returning Sunnis and the ISVs or Sahwa are intent on fighting the "Iranians," which is how they describe the government and virtually all Shiites.

The Americans have never grasped the importance of ideology and of the idea of resisting an occupation. They have insisted that Iraqis joined militias and the resistance for the money, and so they believe that they are now joining the American backed Sunni militias for the money too. The Sunnis the Americans are paying joined the resistance not for money but out of a desire to fight the Occupation, to protect themselves, to seize power, to kill Shiites and "Persians," and for an array of other reasons, none of them related to money. Likewise men don't join the Mahdi Army, which does not even provide salaries, for the money, but out of loyalty to the Sadrist movement, to Muqtada and his father, out of solidarity with their dispossessed Shiite brethren, out of fear of Sunni attacks, resentment of the American occupation and other reasons.

Most embedded journalists, just like embedded politicians and embedded members of think tanks on Washington's K Street or Massachusetts Avenue, lack language skills and time on the ground in Iraq—and since they are white, they cannot travel around Baghdad without attracting attention and getting kidnapped or killed. They know nothing about Iraq except what they gain through second- or third-hand knowledge, too often provided by equally disconnected members of the US military. Recently we have seen positive articles about events in Iraq published by so called experts such as Anthony Cordesmen, Michael O' Hanlon, Kenneth Pollock, Fred Kagan and even former members of the Coalition Provisional Council such as Dan Senor. These men speak no Arabic and cannot get around without their babysitters from the American military. But it seems that the more they get wrong, these and other propagandists for the war, such as Thomas Friedman, manage to maintain their credibility.

They should ask Iraqis, or those journalists who courageously risk their lives to spend enough time with Iraqis to serve as their interlocutors—such as Leila Fadel of McClatchy, Ghaith Abdel Ahad of the Guardian or Patrick Cockburn of the London Independent—what is actually happening in Iraq, rather than continue to deceive the American people with the fantasy of “victory.” It is true that fewer American soldiers are dying today, but that is not the proper metric for success. Of course less Americans are dying. In 2006 the conflict in Iraq stopped being a war of national liberation against the American occupation and became chiefly a war between Iraqis for control of Iraq. The proper standard for judging Iraq is the quality of life for Iraqis, and sadly, for most Iraqis, life was better under Saddam.

There is no reconciliation occurring between the various sects and ethnic groups, the warring communities, and Shiites will not allow the territorial gains they made to be chipped away by Sunnis returning to their homes, and they are determined to keep the Sunni militias out of power. Violence is slightly down in Iraq in large part because the goal of an earlier stage of the conflict—removing Sunnis from Shiite areas and Shiites from Sunni areas—has largely succeeded, and there are fewer people to kill. There may be many years of bloodshed left before equilibrium can be attained.

Many Americans are also unaware that a foreign military occupation is a systematic imposition of violence and terror on an entire people. American soldiers are not there as peacekeepers or policemen, they are not there to “help” the Iraqi people. At least 24,000 Iraqis still languish in American-run prisons. At least 900 of these are juveniles, some of whom are forced to go through a brainwashing program called the “House of Wisdom,” where American officers are arrogant enough to lecture Muslims about Islam. The Americans are supposed to hand over Iraqi prisoners to Iraqi authorities, since it’s theoretically a sovereign country, but international human rights officials are loath to press the issue because conditions in Iraqi prisons are at least as bad as they were under Saddam. One US officer told me that six years is a life sentence in an Iraqi prison today, because that is your estimated life span there. In the women’s prison in Kadhmiya prisoners are routinely raped.

Conditions in Iraqi prisons got much worse during the surge because the Iraqi system could not cope with the massive influx. Those prisoners whom the Americans hand over to the Iraqis may be the lucky ones, but even those Iraqis in American detention do not know why they are being held, and they are not visited by defense lawyers. The Americans can hold Iraqis indefinitely, so they don’t even have to be tried by Iraqi courts. A fraction are tried in courts where Americans also testify. But we have yet to see a trial where the accused is convincingly found guilty and there is valid evidence that is properly examined, with no coerced confessions. Lawyers don’t see their clients before trials, and there are no witnesses. Iraqi judges are prepared to convict on very little evidence. But even if Iraqi courts find Iraqi prisoners innocent, the Americans sometimes continue to hold them after acquittal. These are called “on hold” cases, and there are currently about 500 of them. And the Americans continue to arrest all men of military age when looking for suspects, to break into homes and traumatize sleeping families at night, and to bomb heavily populated areas, killing civilians routinely. Most recently the

Americans killed civilians while bombing Tikrit and now five years into a war allegedly to liberate Shiites the Americans are bombing Shiite areas, serving as the airforce for the Dawa party and the Badr militia.

I visited numerous Iraqi ministries and government offices in January and February. It was the Shiite holy month of Muharram and Shiite flags and religious banners covered these buildings. Radios and televisions in government offices were tuned in to Shiite religious stations. This creates the impression of Shiite ownership of the government among Sunnis, a feeling that they are excluded and unwanted, which is true. But the government is irrelevant anyway, it provides no services, not even the fundamental monopoly on the use of violence. So the focus we have back in Washington on laws being passed is flawed, power is in the hands of militias whose leaders are not in the Green Zone, so events there are a distraction.

Driving to the Amriya district in western Baghdad last month, my friend pointed to a gap in the concrete walls the American occupation forces have surrounded this Sunni bastion with. "We call it the Rafah Crossing," he laughed, referring to the one gates to besieged Gaza that another occupying army occasionally allows open. Iraqi National Police loyal to the Mahdi Army had once regularly attacked Amriya and Sunnis caught in their checkpoints which we drove through anxiously would not long ago have been found in the city morgue. Shiite flags these policemen had recently put up all around western Baghdad were viewed as a provocation by the residents of Amriya. Our car lined up behind dozens of others which had been registered with the local Iraqi army unit and were allowed to enter and exit the imprisoned neighborhood. It often took two or three hours to finally get past the American soldiers, Iraqi soldiers and the "Thuwar," or revolutionaries, as the Sunni militia sanctioned by the Americans to patrol Amriya was called. When it was our turn we exited the vehicle for Iraqi soldiers to search it as an American soldier led his dog around the car to sniff it and I was patted down by one of the Sunni militiamen. Not knowing I was American, he reassured me. "Just let the dog and the dog that is with him finish with your car and you can go," he laughed.

We drove past residents of Amriya forced to trudge a long distance in and out of their neighborhood past the tall concrete walls, because their cars had not been given permission to exit the area. Boys labored behind push carts, wheeling in goods for the shops that were open. One elderly woman in a black robe sat on a push cart and complained loudly that the Americans were to blame for all her problems. Amriya had been a stronghold of the Iraqi resistance since the early days of the occupation, and after Falluja was destroyed in late 2004 resistance members as well as angry displaced Sunnis poured in. Shiites were attacked, even if they were former Baathists, their bodies found lying on the streets every day, and nobody was permitted to touch them.

Forty percent of Amriya's homes were abandoned, their owners were expelled or had fled and over five thousand Sunni families from elsewhere in Iraq had moved in, mostly to Shiite homes. Of those who had fled to Syria, about one fifth had returned in late 2007 when their money ran out. This Ministry of Migration, officially responsible for displaced Iraqis, did nothing for them. The Ministry of Health, dominated by sectarian Shiites,

neglected Amriya or sent expired medicines to its clinics. There was no hospital in the area but Amriya's Sunnis were too scared to go to hospitals outside, because Shiite militias might kidnap and kill them. Like elsewhere in Iraq, the government run ration system, upon which nearly all Iraqis had relied upon for their survival, did not reach the Sunnis of Amriya often, and when it did most items were lacking. Children were suffering from calcium shortages as a result. Over two thousand children were made orphans in Amriya in the last few years. This is Baghdad today. Fiefdoms run by warlords and militiamen. The Americans call them gated communities. In various Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods I found that displaced Iraqis were overwhelming joining militias. They were said to be more aggressive than locals.

Around the same time I was smuggled into the Shiite bastion of Washash, a slum adjacent to the formerly upscale Mansur district. Unusually for a Shiite area, Washash was walled off as well. "We are like Palestine," one local tribal leader told me. I first visited Washash in April 2003, when its unpaved streets were awash with sewage and the nascent Shiite militia of Muatada Sadr, the Mahdi Army, was asserting itself. Not much had changed but the Mahdi Army now firmly controlled the area and had brutally slaughtered or expelled nearly all the Sunnis. Mahdi Army raids into neighboring Mansur to fight al Qaeda or otherwise terrorize locals had prompted the Americans to surround Washash with walls, wiping out its markets which had depended on the surrounding districts for their clientele. Washash's Shiites complained that the Iraqi Army had besieged them and the commander of the local unit was sectarian, punishing them collectively. The Mahdi Army provided what services they had, and as Mahdi Army men gave me a tour and I filmed them on the main intersection and by the walls that kept them in, somebody alerted the Iraqi Army and its soldiers came in looking for me. Mahdi Army men smuggled me out through a small exit in the concrete walls, handing me over to Iraqi National Police for protection from the Iraqi Army. "They are from our group," meaning from the Mahdi Army, the Shiite militiamen assured me when they handed me over to their comrades in the police.

I met Iraqi National Police officers who complained to me that all their men were loyal to the Mahdi Army and their commanders were loyal to the Mahdi Army or the Badr militia. If they were suspected of disloyalty to the Shiite militias their own men informed on them and the Mahdi Army threatened them with the knowledge of their superior officers.