Stanley Foundation Analysis of PIPA Poll on Iraqi Attitudes

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(Poll conducted January 2-5, 2006)

Iraqis of all ethnic and sectarian groups clearly differentiate between violence against outsiders and violence against insiders; the former is viewed with favor in some circumstances, while there is intense dislike for the latter across all ethnic and sectarian groups.

Attacks on Iraqi police officers and civilians are *opposed* by extremely strong majorities of *all* Iraqi ethnic-sectarian groups, including most Sunnis; while in stark contrast, a majority of Sunnis (88%) and even a respectable plurality of Shia (41%) either strongly approve or somewhat approve of attacks on US-led forces and American troops. This suggests that the frequent bloody attacks on Iraqi police officers (and also on average citizens) are being carried out by extremists. In contrast, the results clearly show that deadly attacks on Americans could be carried out (or actively supported) by a wide range of Iraqis. Thus it is entirely possible that attacks on Iraqi police forces and civilians may *not* be supported or carried out by the exact same "insurgents" killing Americans. Some groups may be concentrating on Americans and some on internal terrorism against the Iraqis themselves. This would support the views of those Iraqis who believe the presence of Americans is a magnet for extremist violence and conflict.

And while Iraqis differ in how strongly they oppose intervention by different neighboring states (for instance, a strong majority of Sunnis distrust the influence of Iran, while a majority of Shia distrust the interventions of Syria), there is no majority of Iraqis *in favor of intervention* by any one state in particular. All of this bolsters the claim that Iraqis in general are not receptive to sociopolitical engineering by outside forces.

Nonetheless, the gaps between Sunni Arab Iraqis and other major ethnic-sectarian groups are extremely large on most issues, which raises some doubt about the common ground upon which groups will naturally come together—at least within the boundaries of the current constitution and government in Baghdad.

For example, respondents were asked for the most important reasons for a total withdrawal from Iraq. The answers showed a sharp skew between Sunnis, on the one hand, and Kurds and Shia, on the other, with Kurds being the most sharply in favor of the US presence and a foreign presence—which is not surprising, given that the US presence underwrites the strong Kurdish autonomy within the current political framework. Below are percentages by answer:

- ***It was offensive to have foreign forces of any kind in the country*:** 7% Kurds, 11% Shia, **52% Sunni**, and 22% of other groups agreed with this statement. This constitutes the single strongest reason, among all groups polled, for the United States to leave.

- ***The very presence of US forces creates intergroup violence and conflict***. The skew between ethnic-sectarian groups is again evident: Kurds (4%), Arab Shia (6%), **Sunni (26%),** and other groups (14%) believe this was the most important rationale for a US withdrawal from their country.

- ***Iraq can take care of itself*.** Overall, 13% believe this was the second-most important reason for the United States to leave, with similar skews between groups: Kurds (4%), Shia (8%), **Sunni (34%)**, and other (14%).

Despite these differences, however, there is still widespread cross-group support for relatively quick US withdrawal, ranging from six months to two years. Specifically, in response to the question, "Which of the following would *you like* the newly elected Iraqi government to ask the US-led forces to do after they take office?"

- **35% of all polled supported a withdrawal in six months**, notably including 22% of Shia, **83% of Sunni**, and 36% of "other" ethnic-sectarian groups.

- **35% supported a more gradual two-year timeline**, including notably 28% of Kurds and **49% of Arab Shia**.

- **29% supported withdrawal only after a better security situation evolves.** Notably, **57% of the Kurds** (the only majority supporting this option), with 29% of Arab Shia and 46% of "other" ethnic-sectarian groups added in.

- **In sum, 70% support a US withdrawal within two years that is not tied to the level of stability or security in Iraq,** with Sunnis favoring the quickest withdrawal, but with significant numbers of Shia and "other" groups supporting a relatively quick exit as well. The Kurds, who have benefited the most since 1991 from their US-ensured autonomy from Saddam Hussein, are the only ones who feel very strongly about tying a US exit to security conditions on the ground.

A sobering fact, in this regard, is the implicitly low opinion of current US efforts to thwart criminal activity, interethnic violence, and extremist terrorism by external groups infiltrating the country, as well as doubts about the US ability to support greater political unity between factions in parliament. Specifically:

- 64% of those polled, including Shia as well as Sunni Arabs, believe that both **crime and violent attacks** will decrease if the United States leaves the country within six months (only the Kurds dissented by a majority).

- 73% of all those polled, including majorities of all major ethnic-sectarian groups, believe that **factions in parliament will cooperate more after the United States withdraws**, showing a widespread feeling that the US presence is being used by some groups to further their own ends, at the expense of a cooperative, collective public good.

- Majorities of all groups except the Kurds (between 64-81% of all non-Kurdish groups) believe that **interethnic violence** will decrease with a US withdrawal.

- A majority of Shia Arabs (64%) and Sunni Arabs (74%) believe that the **presence of foreign fighters** will decrease with a US withdrawal in six months.

- A majority of all major ethnic-sectarian groups (67% of Iraqis) believe that their **day-to-day security** will increase if the US withdraws.

- Finally, a majority of all groups polled believe that **day-to-day services (health, education, electricity)** will increase upon US withdrawal.

In sum, there is a low Iraqi opinion of US capabilities in offering timely, effective foreign aid for education, reconstruction, energy, and other vital domestic infrastructure.

- Although 65-77% of Iraqis polled approved of US aid for economic development; oil infrastructure development; training of Iraqi police forces; mediation between ethnic groups, building government institutions, and building of other national and local infrastructure such as roads, electrical facilities, schools, and clinics, *44-52% of these same groups believe the United States was doing a poor job of these tasks*.

- Not surprisingly, 59% of those surveyed (including a strong majority of individual groups except the Sunnis) preferred that the United Nations take over these tasks for Iraq.

Finally, there is distrust of long-range US security intentions: 80% of all groups polled, including majorities of *all* major ethnic and religious groups, believe that the United States would maintain permanent military bases in their country.

But the United States is not alone in being distrusted by Iraqis. Surprisingly, **only a plurality of Iraqi Shia viewed Iran's role as positive (43%), while 30% actually view it negatively, and 26% have no strong opinion either way.** Further, only 9% of Kurds support the Iranian role; 63% believe it to be wholly negative; and a strong plurality of 23% view it as neither positive nor negative. Undoubtedly, this is tied to the fact that Iran has a strong Kurdish minority in Northern Iran (bordering Kurdish Iraq), and Iran has recently been acting with force against pro-Kurdish sentiment within its borders. Indeed, the Revolutionary Guards have been covertly intervening in Kurdish affairs in Northern Iraq since 1991.

In short, **Tehran does not have a blank check for unlimited intervention in Iraq, in terms of making southern Iraq a strategic outpost of the Islamic Republic.** Iran's future role in Iraqi politics is likely to be curbed, constrained, and limited by the ambivalent/negative indigenous Kurdish and Shia evaluation of Iran's role.

Putting this all together, even if civil war were to break out in Iraq, this would not represent a cross-Iraqi desire for external intervention by any one state or great power. Iraqi nationalism, though suffering from intense schisms between contending ethnic-sectarian groups, is apparently potent enough overall to oppose any outsider foolhardy enough to attempt a unilateral imposition of domestic order in Iraq.

Thus the US role is clearly over, in terms of maintaining military and political power within the country. There is deep distrust of US goals and intentions for Iraq among Sunni groups, and given this groups' strong historical role in Iraqi nationhood, it is unrealistic to believe that the insurgency is amenable to simple counterterrorism methods and military solutions. **The battle against terrorism is not something that the United States can prosecute with any legitimacy and support from the Sunni—and even in the case of Shia and Kurds, there are doubts about the efficacy and simple competency of US actions**. For these latter groups, supporting the *intentions* of the US presence is not the same as believing the United States is *capable and competent* in achieving its goals in the country. **Thus poll results suggest that if violent, extremist, transnational terrorists are to be jailed, killed, or kicked out of the country, it is the Iraqis themselves who are going to do this.**

But distrust of US goals, and opposition to US occupation, is not the same as domestic unity. While Iraqis are united in distrusting and opposing outsiders, they are disunited in nearly all other respects: whether it was advisable to end Saddam's rule, whether Iraq is moving forward or backward in terms of justice and fairness, whether current political institutions can create a strong Iraqi future for all.

- The parliamentary results of December 2005—though declared largely free, fair, and equitable by reputable international agencies and monitors—are viewed as illegitimate and unfair by a strong majority (94%) of Sunnis, and even roughly 51% of "other" groups in the country beyond Shia and the Kurds.

- Thus even though the parliamentary elections did in fact increase the level of direct Sunni representation in Baghdad, this positive result has not changed basic attitudes among disenfranchised and alienated Sunnis (and many other ethnic-sectarian groups) in the general populace.

- Indeed, in response to the question, "Do you think that the *government* to be established by the newly elected parliament *will or will not be the legitimate representative of the Iraqi people*?" [emphasis added], only 5% of Sunnis and roughly 49% (of course, 49% is roughly 50%)of other non-Kurdish and non-Shia groups said that the new parliament would create an overall fair and representative federal government in Baghdad.

Overall, a representative parliament does *not* equate with a legitimate, authoritative government in general—a clearly dysfunctional result that does not bode well for future stability under the current political framework. It would appear that there is a strong disconnect between institutions set up earlier under the first Charter/referenda and the specific results of current parliamentary elections.

This is shown in **opinions about general trends in Iraq**. In response to the general question, "Do you think that Iraq today is generally headed in the right direction or the wrong direction?" only 6% of Sunnis agreed with this statement, compared to 76% of Kurds and 84% of Shia polled. Meanwhile, a strong plurality of other ethnic-sectarian groups (40%) answered in the negative as well.

This disunity is also shown in various Iraqis' views of US *nonmilitary aid*, as well as *potential future contributions of the international community* as a whole:

- While a majority of Kurds, Shia, and "other" ethnic-sectarian groups in Iraq generally approved of US nonmilitary aid (though with the caveat that the United States administers it poorly), strong majorities of Sunni—in the high 70th/low 80th percentile range—completely disapproved of US attempts to help Iraqis in any way.

- While 72% of Kurds, 69% of Shia, and a very strong 82% of "other" ethnic-sectarian groups approved of a **future global, multilateral conference to offer a new plan for Iraqi security, development, and stability involving Europeans, Middle East states, and the United Nations**, 57% of Sunnis believe it was "best for other countries to stay out of Iraq's affairs."

Thus as the United States draws down its forces and gradually leaves the country, the international community has a very difficult choice to make: whether to urge alienated groups to continue participating in the existing political process/framework (as suggested by the strong Iraqi support of this goal at the Arab League conference) *or* to instead press for starting largely from scratch with a new charter, constitution, and institutional framework.

- It is not clear from existing polls which would be the better course, and certainly, starting from scratch has many risks, not least of which is that Kurds and Shia would strongly oppose any such backward movement, and a second attempt could end up with even worse provisions.

- Nonetheless, it is clear that the present elections are seen as illegitimate by most Sunni groups—not because the elections themselves were unfair or corrupt, but because of an innate belief that even a fair election will not guarantee a government in Baghdad that truly is supportive of all groups in the country.

This points to a positive conclusion not covered adequately in current press accounts: there is some evidence of room for external mediation on sensitive issues by multilateral institutions and agencies.

- Notably, **73% of all Iraqis polled approved of the Arab League's attempt to mediate between contending ethnic-sectarian groups**, with only 25% of Shia and 18% of Kurds in opposition. Thus the 73% majority reflected roughly equal support among all groups.

- When asked about their overall evaluation of the effects of the Arab League on Iraq (beyond the above conference), there was no strong opposition to this international actor becoming more involved. **There was a roughly equal three-way split among all Iraqi groups in their evaluation of the Arab League as an institution:** about equal numbers of Kurds and Shia viewed the Arab League's role as "positive," "negative," or "no effect," while for Sunnis, there was a roughly equal split between "positive" and "negative," with a majority (50%) simply believing the Arab League has had no real effect on the domestic situation thus far.

- **More positively, the final results of the late 2005 Arab League conference enjoyed strong legitimacy across ethnic-sectarian groups**. Normal Iraqis were asked their opinion about the three major items signed by leaders of all ethnic-sectarian groups in Cairo, namely:

  - Terrorism should be rejected (99%).

  - All groups should participate in the political process (97%).

  - There should be a timetable for withdrawal of US-led forces from Iraq (87%).[1]

- **The United Nations did not fare as well, however:** only the Kurds gave the United Nations a majority "positive" rating (60%), while Shia were ambivalent (39% for; 38% against) and Sunni were opposed (57% against; 20% for). When comparing international institutions, therefore, clearly the regional actor (the Arab League) is seen as more relevant—and more positive in its overall effects—than its global cousin in New York.

Thus, despite Sunni doubts and wariness, the one positive forward course, in terms of external involvement, seems to be *multilateral* rather than unilateral in nature. It is clear that Iraqis will never support a unilateral intervention in their internal affairs, whether by the United States or anyone else—Iran, Arab neighbors, Syria, or perhaps even other great powers. But the limited efforts thus far by a prominent regional multilateral actor—the Arab League—has received extremely strong endorsement across all Iraqi groups, and the Iraqis' general estimation of the Arab League as an institution, while not unanimous, is also not overtly hostile in the sense of a strong majority

[1] Only 64% of Kurds agreed with the latter, which, although still a strong majority of that group, pulled the overall average down to 87%.

opposition. Thus stronger Arab League involvement would appear to be the best avenue for external attempts at domestic conflict management, post-conflict reconstruction, inter-group mediation, and social reconciliation. The United Nations might also play a role, though probably as a secondary international institution.

The existence of an opening for multilateral aid to Iraq is supported by the fact that Iraqis are still wary of the claim that indigenous police forces will be able to shoulder the security burden anytime soon: 58% of all Iraqis polled believe that they will still need the help of foreign military forces—a figure that includes 73% of Kurds, 55% of Shia Arabs and, surprisingly, 59% of Sunni Arabs.