



What I saw in Iraq

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Last week, I embedded with U.S. Army troops at Forward Operating Base Justice in northern Baghdad. Outside the wire, we toured the slums and met with neighborhood leaders inching toward self-sufficiency in al Salam. We sipped chai with a sheikh who condemned terrorists on all sides. We watched residents bicker over a civil affairs blanket drop in Khadamiyah. We sat with slimy Mahdi Army apologists in Hurriya. We stopped by a Sunni insurgent enclave, which soldiers I patrolled with dubbed a "sniperville," in al Adil.

There's nothing glamorous or romantic about these missions. No one will make a movie about our men and women in uniform engaged in the tedious, painstaking business of moving Iraq toward stability and

governability. But if the war is to be won—if security is to be established and the foundations of a civil society bolstered—this is ground zero. The troops I met ask only three things of their fellow Americans back home: time, patience, and understanding of the enormous complexities on the ground.

In Washington, counterinsurgency theory (COIN) is a neat, elite intellectual abstraction. Since coalition forces simply can't catch and kill every insurgent lurking in the populace, the theory goes, it's up to the military to persuade the Iraqi people to turn on the insurgents, join the political process, and help themselves. At FOB Justice—former headquarters of Saddam Hussein's ruthless military intelligence unit, the site of the dictator's execution by

hanging, and home to the Dagger Brigade 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division—COIN is a vivid, hands-on reality. Here, a task force of brainy commanders, brawny patrol officers, courageous Arab-American interpreters, wizened trainers and intel gatherers, baby-faced convoy drivers, and grim-humored gunners attempts to put President Bush's "winning hearts and minds" idealism into daily practice.

Modern war in the Middle East is no longer as cut-and-dry as shooting all the bad guys and going home. We are fighting a "war of the fleas"—not just Sunni terrorists and Shiite death squads, but multiple home-grown and foreign operators, street gangs, organized crime, and freelance jihadis conducting ambushes, extra-judicial killings, sectarian attacks, vehicle bombings, and sabotage against American, coalition, and Iraqi forces. Cellphones, satellites, and the Internet have allowed the fleas to magnify their importance, disseminate insurgent propaganda instantly, and weaken political will.

I came to Iraq a darkening pessimist about the war, due in large part to my doubts about the compatibility of Islam and Western-style democracy, but also as a result of the steady, sensational diet of "grim milestone" and "daily IED count" media coverage that aids the insurgency.

I left Iraq with unexpected hope and resolve.

The everyday bravery and con-

summate professionalism of the troops I embedded with has strengthened my faith in the U.S. military. These soldiers are well aware of the history, culture, and sectarian strife that has wracked the Muslim world for more than a millennium. "They love death," one gunner muttered as we heard explosions in the distance while parked in al Adil. Nevertheless, these troops are willing to put their lives on the line to bring security to Iraq, one neighborhood at a time.

They have teamed with Sunni and Shia, Iraqi civilian and soldier, alike to establish local government structures and security framework districts. "We are not here to build the Iraqi Security Forces," Lieutenant Colonel Steven Miska, deputy commander for the Dagger Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, said. "We're here to grow them. You can't just plant and walk away." Capt. Aaron Kaufman of Task Force Justice added: "It's not a six-month or year-long process, especially when you're talking about training the Iraqi forces."

The troops I met scoff at peace activists' efforts to "bring them home now." But they are just as critical of the Bush administration and Pentagon's missteps—from holding Iraqi elections too early, to senselessly breaking up their brigade combat team, to drawing down forces and withdrawing last year in Baghdad and Fallujah, to failing to hold cities after clearing them of insurgents. They speak candidly and critically of Shiite militia infiltration of some Iraqi police and Iraqi Army units

and corruption in government ministries, but they want you to know about the unheralded good news, too.

Every day, Iraqi Army trainees risk their lives and their family's lives to come to work at FOB Justice. Residents of Khadamiyah approach the base with tips. Schools are re-opening; neighborhood councils are sharing intelligence. "All those things are coming together," Capt. Stacy Bare, civil affairs officer, said

emphatically.

Winning the counterinsurgency battle is not just about keeping Iraqis safe. It's about keeping Americans safe—by sending a message that the mightiest military in the world cannot and will not be outwitted and outlasted by the fleas. On the emblem of the Dagger Brigade are two imperatives: "Continue mission!" and "Duty first." These troops are committed to their mission. They deserve our commitment to them.

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