Forgotten Iraq

Contributed by MWC News
Wednesday, 02 November 2005

The War in Maysan Province

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Society + Culture,

Michael Schwartz on What We Don't See in Iraq

by MWC Editor At Large Tom Engelhardt

Since Guardian correspondent Rory Carroll was briefly kidnapped in Baghdad and the paper recalled its reporters while it reviewed the situation, there has a lively debate in the English press about the nature and limits of Western reporting in Iraq. Carroll himself, since being freed, has insisted that Iraq remains a story more capable of being covered than most people realize; that even "Green Zone" journalism has a positive side; and that "hotel journalism" is not the essence of what's happening if you're a press journalist:

"When asked about the suggestion that British journalists in Iraq just report from their hotel rooms, Carroll said: ‘I get quite annoyed when that perception is reinforced. For TV crews it is mostly hotel journalism, because they are bulkier and more visible than print people -- they have to travel in big convoys, and their insurance and bureaucratic rules are such that it's a huge deal for them to leave the hotel. The print guys, and this applies to all the other British papers, we get out of the hotel pretty much every day. Our security is contingent entirely on invisibility, which is why we try to blend in.'"

Peter Beaumont, his colleague at the Observer, also believes that reporting on Iraq, while unbearably dangerous, remains "still just possible":

"You learn in large measure to deal with it, adapting your behavior to the different kinds of threat. Many of the men grow beards, the women reporters wear abayas. Traveling around Baghdad, you move ‘low profile' in tatty but well-serviced cars. I take off my glasses as they look too ‘Euro' and wear stripy shirts that look ‘Mansour' -- the fashionable middle-class district of Baghdad."

On the other hand, veteran correspondent Robert Fisk, a man never lacking in reportorial bravery, recently announced that, given the outsized dangers now inherent in the situation, he wasn't sure he could still report from Iraq. He refers to what he now does on his visits to Iraq as "mouse journalism."

"If I go to see someone in any particular location, I give myself 12 minutes, because that is how long I reckon it takes a man with a mobile phone to summon gunmen to the scene in a car. So, after 10 minutes I am out. Don't be greedy. That's what reporting is like in Iraq… One of the delights of the occupying powers is that the journalists cannot move. When I travel outside Baghdad by road it takes me two weeks to plan it, because the roads are infested with insurgents, checkpoints, hooded men and throat-cutters. That's what it's like."

Just the other day, I heard an American freelance correspondent on a panel at Columbia University second Fisk on the sanity of his "12-minute rule." Similarly, the exceedingly brave former war correspondent, Maggie O'Kane recently leveled a blast in the Guardian at Iraqi coverage. Claiming she "lost nerve" in Afghanistan in 2002 after three of her colleagues were pulled from a car and, "in roughly the same amount of time as it takes to boil a kettle," executed by the Taliban, she then commented on present-day Iraq:

"The hacks are corralled in a single hotel where huge egos bang off the wall and each other. After a week or two, the atmosphere becomes suffocating… Since Al-Zarqawi's people started cutting off heads it is too dangerous for foreigners to go out. So, instead, his poor Iraqi fixer is off to some hell hole to count the bodies and get the pictures… And that is the great tragedy for war reporting now. We no longer know what is going on but we are pretending we do. Any decent reporter knows that reporting from Baghdad now does a disservice to the truth."

Increasingly, the fixers and translators have morphed into journalists -- and brave ones at that -- while services like

Knight Ridder (whose coverage of Iraq has been outstanding) and Reuters have been hiring Iraqi reporters. Some of these reporters have then found themselves in American jails for covering the Iraqi insurgents; and almost 40 of them have died (without much note in our press) reporting the occupation and the insurgency -- as well as one, Yasser Salihee, evidently killed by an American sniper while driving to get gas on his day off in the low-level war zone that is much of Iraq. Some of them, like photographer and reporter Ghaith Abdul Ahad, given a chance to write under their own names in major papers, have done extraordinary and daring work.

With rare exceptions -- including the Washington Post's remarkable Anthony Shadid (now in Syria), whose dramatic book on his time in Iraq, Night Draws Near, reflects his superb reporting -- American reporters may be almost as crippled by not being Arabic-speakers as by the dangers of Iraq. It remains an amazing fact that an American occupation which began largely without Arabic-speakers -- it was going to be too easy to stock up on people who actually spoke the language -- has since been covered in our press mainly by reporters who can't communicate directly with the people they're covering (unless, of course, they happen to speak English).

Still, there can be little question that in Iraq (and possibly elsewhere) the nature of war reporting is undergoing some kind of sea change. Iraq is a war in which correspondents disappear into detention or die not because they are covering dangerous events and happen to be caught in a crossfire, but because they are often prime targets themselves -- of guerrillas and terrorists, of gangs of for-profit kidnappers, or of the American military. As a result, the war (and the Iraq) we see in our newspapers, and especially on our television sets, is a distinctly constricted one, often hardly wider than the nearest giant American military base or Baghdad's well-fortified Green Zone. Perhaps reporters, bearded or not, slipping by as anonymously as possible or in heavily armed security convoys, embedded with American or even Iraqi troops, can make it to spots around Baghdad, or, on rare occasions, elsewhere in the country (as part of military operations), but even for the bravest Western journalists, this has to be a desperately limiting situation.

Not surprisingly, whole areas of Iraq remain beyond our view much, if not all, of the time. Michael Schwartz picks one forgotten province where war and resistance, first to Saddam Hussein and then to foreign occupation, have been a constant, and reporting, in our press at least, an irregular, small miracle. He offers a modest suggestion about the shape of what we don't normally see of Iraq. Tom

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The War in Maysan Province
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So much of the Iraq war operates below the radar screen of the mainstream media that we rarely glimpse what is really going on -- either in the daily lives of Iraqis or in the daily life of the war itself. The news we do get is generally filled with moments when large numbers of soldiers, policemen, and civilians are killed in suicide attacks; or with the surreal machinations of American and Iraqi politicians so disconnected from Iraqi reality that they can hardly venture outside Baghdad's hermetically sealed "Green Zone," even with convoys of armed guards.

In the meantime, Western reporters in Iraq are, by and large, locked into their own little Green-Zone-style situations, held back from anything like normal reporting by the dangers they face. Fortunately, there are significant exceptions to this rule. Many reporters do venture outside their protective cocoons -- often at great peril to themselves -- to chase down stories, do real investigative journalism, or explore as best they can the daily lives of Iraqis and the nature of the Iraqi resistance. By normal journalistic standards, their reports should be plastered across front pages and dominate the TV news about Iraq; but, alas, they all too often are relegated to the inside pages or obscure locations on the Internet. And most Americans consequently get, at best, the briefest glimpses of any deeper Iraqi reality.

Nevertheless, some of the larger picture is out there, even if in hard to find places and so accessible only to those of us with the time and persistence to dig it up. Take, for example, Maysan province, a small Shia area in southeastern Iraq abutting Iran. Maysan is not in the "Sunni Triangle," so it is not in the eye of the Sunni resistance hurricane. It is not occupied by American troops but the British Staffordshire Regiment, renowned for its non-aggressive approach to occupying Iraq. The region's only claim to newsworthiness has been its status as the historical home of the Marsh Arabs, infamously dispersed by Saddam Hussein when he drained the marshes that cover a substantial portion of the province. In 2003, there was a brief flurry of Maysan coverage when, just after the invasion, the marshes were partially re-flooded and some of the Marsh Arabs returned to their ancestral home.

An Unnoticed Hotspot of Insurgency

Maysan is worth our attention for another reason: For the past two-plus years it has been the site of a low-intensity, low-visibility war that may be a better measure of the fate of the occupation than higher profile battles in cities like Falluja and Tal Afar. It has been the subject of some excellent but little noted investigative journalism, notably a magnificent recent report by Pamela Hess of United Press International and an earlier background piece by Doug Struck of the Washington Post.

Maysan Province has a rebellious history. Saddam was never able to bring it to heel and this was a key motivation for draining the marshes and displacing the Marsh Arabs. But even this draconian solution didn't pacify Maysan. For years, the Hussein regime maintained an occupying force of 20,000 troops there, partly because of the province's proximity to Iran and partly to suppress local guerrillas, who remained active right up to the American invasion.

When the American attack became imminent and Saddam pulled his troops out of the area to defend Baghdad, the local guerrillas immediately took control of the capital, Amarah, and installed their own government. The British -- in charge of Southern Iraq for the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority -- arrived five days later, and local residents greeted them as invaders with no business in town. According to Capt. Andy McLannahan, the British commander, the local attitude was, "What are you doing here?" As far as the locals were concerned, "it was they who ousted Hussein's forces, not the U.S. invasion." When the British imposed their authority and displaced the insurgent government, the residents were bitter. As UPI's Hess put it, "In the local eyes they had just traded one occupation for another."

Since then, the British have had no better success than Saddam in subduing the province. The resistance there has evolved through several stages, each a response to changing occupation strategies and their own capabilities. At first, insurgents fought sporadic guerrilla battles with the British. This so strained the capacity of the 1,000 strong occupation force that the British actually withdrew from Majar al Kabir, the town with the most militant and aggressive resistance cells. During this period, the province became a center of strength for the Mahdi Army, the military wing of the Sadrist movement that would eventually fight major battles with the Americans in Najaf and Sadr City, Baghdad's enormous Shiite slum.

In the spring of 2004, the poorly armed, poorly trained Sadrists felt strong enough to challenge the British directly, and a 100-day battle commenced in the provincial capital of Amarah. (There was little coverage of this, in part because the almost simultaneous and far larger battle in Najaf drew so much attention.) The British claimed complete victory -- 800 guerrillas killed without the loss of a single British soldier -- but they also discontinued virtually all patrols in the city, leaving local governance to the supporters of the resistance. This withdrawal also marked an end to various ambitious reconstruction projects that had been promised and scheduled by the occupiers. In January 2005, the Sadrists won the provincial elections.

Finally, in April 2005, the British ordered the Staffordshire Regiment to pacify Amarah and retake full control of the province. They utilized a strategy similar to the one the Americans were applying in the Sunni areas of the country: Armed patrols invaded rebellious neighborhoods and broke into the homes of suspected resistance fighters (and their suspected supporters), arresting large numbers and killing anyone who resisted. Construction began on 13 impregnable police stations in an attempt to convert the police into a viable weapon against the resistance. According to the U.S. Command in Iraq, these stations were to be the most imposing structures in town, equipped with "guard towers, security walls, generator installation, exterior lighting, bullet-proof glass, bars on exterior windows, steel exterior doors, and an antenna." These, in turn, would "improve the morale of the police so they will do a better job," and so, supposedly, deal with a pattern found in rebellious areas across Iraq -- police unwilling or unable to fight the guerrillas.

At this point, the guerrillas abandoned their failed effort to confront the British army directly and settled into the pattern that characterizes the war everywhere in the country: IEDs by roadsides and hit-and-run attacks targeting the patrols of the occupying power. By the middle of summer, the new strategy had begun to inflict consistent casualties on the British, and Maysan province officially became a hot spot of insurgency.

A Protracted War of Attrition

The ongoing battle in Maysan catches something of the nature of the guerrilla war in other under-reported parts of Iraq. UPI's Hess pointed to the hallmark of guerrilla warfare when reporting that, "despite the violence, the Iraqis here consider Maysan to be safe and secure because -- unlike in the Sunni triangle -- local civilians and police are not the targets of the insurgents." In other words, the local Shia resistance is mainly in the business of expelling the occupation. They target British soldiers, and mostly try to avoid civilian casualties. Because the police have not attacked them, they usually do not target the police. They are for the most part (in the classic guerrilla mode) defenders of the local order, and there would be little violence if the British did not enter the towns and cities where the resistance is strong. In these circumstances, the local population feels safe (when the British are not around) because they do not expect attacks from the resistance.

The British, like all historic occupation armies, have a great deal of trouble dealing with (or even understanding) this strategy. One intelligence officer told Hess: "Anything that smacks of the insurgency from the north [the police] jump on quite quickly," But the British seem bewildered by the local police's "live and let live" attitude toward the local resistance, an attitude captured by British commander McLannahan:

"The local [Iraqi] army brigade patrols the rural areas of Maysan, interdicting smugglers and insurgents. Police forces

patrol inside the cities, and are less likely -- because of tribal ties and local loyalties -- to crack down on militiamen. However, they reliably turn up weapons caches. When you ask them if they caught the people, they usually have 'just got away.'"

Hess sums up the British position thusly: "The British estimate that, like much of Iraq, most of the locals only want to get on with the lives. It is a small minority that is up to no good. ‘But the large majority allow the small number to carry on' McLannahan acknowledged."

As in any low-intensity guerrilla war, the "large majority" allow the guerrillas to continue to operate. The police and National Guard do their part by failing to apprehend the local guerrillas, even when ordered to do so by their British superiors.

It is clear that the resistance in Maysan has now dug in for a protracted war of attrition. Their 2004 offensive, designed to expel the British entirely, failed while producing many casualties. But the new IED-based hit-and-run tactics can undoubtedly be sustained for as long as the British remain, just as the earlier campaign against Saddam continued for years.

In the meantime, the occupation guarantees support for the resistance, not only by arresting and killing suspected activists whose family and friends are then drawn into the battle, but also by stoking the continuing crisis that prevents residents from maintaining a viable local economy. During the brief five-day period when local residents ruled the province, before the British asserted their control, they "broke the earthen levees and opened the floodgates" that had kept the marshes dry. This action, designed to restore their historic source of sustenance, was not successful in restoring the local economy. Previous diversions of rivers north of Maysan (in Baghdad and elsewhere) meant that there was insufficient water to refill the marsh area. Later, constantly increasing pollution, thanks to destroyed sewage systems in these same upstream areas, contaminated the re-flooded parts of the marshes, making them unviable for cultivation.

This misfortune made clear, even to the most parochial locals, that the fate of Maysan province rests on larger national reconstruction programs now largely in abeyance. Virtually all of them blame the occupation for its failure to reconstruct the country and for the constantly escalating crises that result from that failure -- the pollution of the marshes, the chronic electrical outages, the lack of medicine, and the absence of other infrastructural necessities that even the Hussein regime had delivered semi-reliably. As local resident Rahan Nahie told the Washington Post's Doug Struck in early 2005, "All the babies are sick, and the environment all around is bad. There are no fish here. We have no jobs. We need help,"

This discontent will continue to fuel the rebellion as long as the British, like the Americans, respond to protests, both peaceful and violent, with military violence. One British official expressed this imperial attitude perfectly when he told Struck, "The province is clearly in need of a strong authority." The comment reflects a British decision to continue to root out the resistance by military means, which in turn guarantees both ongoing misery for the local population and a growing guerrilla war.

Maysan is by no means a typical province, as the many elements in its history make clear. But then, each province (and each city within each province) is similarly unique. There are nevertheless enduring patterns here that catch something of the experience of Iraqis -- with the exception of those in Kurdish areas of the country -- under the American and British occupation. Uninterrupted economic decline is an enduring pattern; brutal repression of dissent is another, as are the absence of a responsive government and an ever more fervent local desire to expel the occupation. Even where the war is largely invisible to us, there are resistance movements in ever expanding areas that the occupation simply cannot control.

The high-profile battles, the suicide car-bomb offensives, and the constitutional debates will have little impact on this inexorable drumbeat of occupation and resistance.

Michael Schwartz, Professor of Sociology at Stony Brook University, has written extensively on popular protest and insurgency, and on American business and government dynamics. His work on Iraq appears regularly at TomDispatch, Asia Times, ZNET, Against the Current, and Z Magazine. His books include Radical Politics and Social Structure and Social Policy and the Conservative Agenda.