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Simon McDonald
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Dear Simon

BASRA: EVERYDAY LIFE FOR ORDINARY IRAQIS

Summary

1. For most people, life in Basra is still grim. The lives of ordinary Basrawis are blighted by subversive and criminal elements. Modest improvements in their quality of life pale against a backdrop of militia intimidation, official corruption and inadequate basic services. There is some good news, however. The better off can enjoy new consumer goods and the novelty of the freedom to travel outside Iraq. Women enjoy more political rights and there is an embryonic civil society movement. Many Sunni families who left Basra last year have now returned. There are some signs of growth in the local economy and public sector salaries have steadily increased.

Detail

Sources

2. You asked for an account of what life is like for ordinary Basrawis. This report updates my letter of 7 November 2006. It draws on over 100 interviews conducted in and around Basra city by Major Karen Czernik of the Basra PRT, my conversations with a range of other Basrawis, Consulate questionnaires circulated at a women's conference on 19 February, and opinion poll data commissioned by Corps and conducted in December 2006 (based on a sample of 660 in Basra). I am grateful to Major Czernik and Karen McLuskie (Head of the Consulate's Political Section) for much of the work that has gone into this report.

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3. Violence and lawlessness are the overwhelming concern of Basrawis. Although life under Saddam was harsh, people often say that at least they knew where they stood. Now, life is less predictable and people are retreating behind the traditional defences of family and tribe. In polling, 95% said they felt a degree of safety in their immediate neighbourhood but only 30% felt safe further afield. Many Basrawis tell us "Before 2003, there was one Saddam to fear. Now there are thousands of Saddams."
4. Ordinary people fear being caught in the crossfire of fighting between MNF and the militias, being kidnapped for ransom, or arrested by police death squads. Although there is no Sunni insurgency in the South, people often name al-Qaida as the biggest threat to their family's safety, perhaps an indication of sectarian scare mongering filtering down from Baghdad.
5. Women are increasingly afraid of to leave the house, fearing kidnap, harassment or sexual violence. Many women, including professionals, have been forced to give up their jobs and stay at home. People say that nowadays they always drive their wives to work and their daughters to school, which was unnecessary before 2003. When women do venture out on the streets, most of them wear a black abaya (covering the body from head to toe) for self-protection. One interviewee said that his nine year old niece had been sent home from school for not wearing a hijab. When he went to the school to challenge this rule, he was told that it was "the law of Sadr, the law of Iran". There are reports of children being kidnapped and their parents forced to pay a ransom for their release.
6. After sunset most people desert the streets, stay home and watch TV. Most households have satellite TV, which was banned during Saddam's regime. Watching television is more popular than reading newspapers because many newspapers are of low quality and there is no distribution system. Newspapers are available in the markets but for security reasons people only go to the market once a week. Gangs of intimidating youths populate the corniche where families used to promenade and the parks and open spaces are considered dangerous. Basrawis complain that there is nowhere for children to play. Theatres, cinemas and some restaurants have been closed in the past year by the political parties. People say it's essential to carry a gun after dark and for any kind of car journey out of town.
7. Threats and intimidation are an everyday occurrence, with letters delivered to people warning them to cease whatever activity they are doing which is displeasing the militias. There are posters naming people working for MNF and according to a former local employee of the consulate, last week four men working as labourers at the Air Station were dragged from their houses and shot. Militiamen forced neighbours into the street to watch the execution. There are reports that families must pay the militias not to break up wedding parties where music might be playing and the sexes mixing. Militiamen violently harass young men and women dressing or behaving 'contrary to Islam'. Some Basrawis do not answer their mobile phones to numbers they don't recognise to avoid hearing threats.

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Rule of Law

8. While polling suggests that the IPS inspire confidence in about 65% of the population (lower than in al-Muthanna and Dhi Qar but higher than Maysan), those questioned by British representatives said that the police could not be trusted. Many told stories of intimidation and claimed knowledge of kidnappings and death squads. Others said they would not call the police emergency hotline to report criminal or terrorist activity for fear that policemen taking the calls were in cahoots with the militias. Basrawis are willing to call the police to report general crime but if criminals threaten them or their families, they are more likely to turn to their tribe for help.
9. Support for MNF in Basra is also difficult to gauge. Polling suggests that there is little confidence in MNF to improve the situation in Iraq generally and that a large majority of people in Basra want MNF to leave the province immediately. Support for MNF withdrawal from the centre of the city is particularly strong among those who live in the vicinity of MNF bases and who are at risk of injury or damage to their property from rockets and mortars that go astray (as many do). However, in informal interviews and anonymous questionnaires, all respondents say they wish MNF to stay and fear 'a blood bath' if they don't. Many cannot comprehend why MNF does not intervene more aggressively to arrest the criminal and corrupt. There is a growing acknowledgement that only MNF have the power to confront the worst offenders – which may explain the growing (if discreetly expressed) support for strike operations.
10. The marked discrepancy between the results of the polling data and what Basrawis tell us about attitudes towards the police and MNF is almost certainly down to the fact that the opinion poll interviews are conducted by Iraqis (who do not know that the study they are undertaking is sponsored by MNF). Most Basrawis are afraid to complain about the Police and the militia or to show support of the work of MNF in front of other Iraqis, especially someone they don't know. Since the risk to pollsters would increase if it was known that their work was associated with MNF, the poll results should not be publicly quoted.

Governance

11. All sources indicate that, while support for the national government and Prime Minister Al-Maliki is high, that for the Basra Provincial Government is low. Nearly all interviewees to whom we spoke said that they did not trust their local politicians whom they see as corrupt, unqualified and linked to militias. They believe that Provincial Council members and their cronies have siphoned off funds provided to the provincial authorities by the GOI and the donor community. Not one interviewee was able to give an example of something that their local government had done to improve the life of ordinary people. All the main parties (Fadhila, OMS, SCIRI/Badr and Da'wa) are equally discredited with trends of declining support over the last six months. With no credible

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alternatives, only around half of Basrawis say they are likely to vote in the next provincial elections.

Economy

12. After the lack of security, unemployment is the most commonly cited problem. Polling indicates that only about 30% of Basrawis are currently employed, though high unemployment is partly offset by jobs in the cash/black economy. Many graduates are unemployed and a lot of professionals have left Basra to go and work abroad.
13. Half of those polled who were employed said they worked in the public sector and 35% worked part time in the private sector. The salaries of public sector workers have steadily increased since 2003 and the dream of most Basrawis is to have a salaried government job. However, the educated complain that party connections are more important than qualifications in the public sector and a bribe always need to be paid. "You need to be a member of the Fadhila party to get a government job".
14. Many say there has been some improvement in the economy in the past year with about 60% describing their household's present financial situation as manageable though 69% said they rely on government food rations to survive (compared to 97% in Dhi Qar and 87% in Al-Muthanna). Women tell us that more people in Basra are getting married. This is interpreted by Basrawis as a positive economic indicator because young Iraqi men wait to get married until they are earning enough to support a family.
15. There are many more products in the market place than before 2003. Mobile phones, music players and white goods are now easy to buy for those that can afford them and everyone can celebrate the recent return of bananas and brand name soft drinks. There are more cars on the streets. Cooking and vehicle fuel shortages (and the consequent hike in prices) are a constant problem for most families.
16. Formal investment in Basra has not taken off but local construction firms have profited from MNF and GOI reconstruction spending, honestly or otherwise. Oil smuggling continues to be hugely profitable for some. Enormous concrete mansions have sprung up in the north of city. However, housing has failed to keep pace with Basra's burgeoning population. Since 2003, low quality, unplanned houses have been built on open spaces around the city with no access to basic services such as water supply and sewage.

Basic Services and Infrastructure

17. Only a quarter of those polled said they were aware of reconstruction activities, with most citing roads and schools as examples. Few saw any improvement in basic services and viewed reconstruction as limited and of poor quality. One example is the Ar-Rabbad bridge which was started 4 years ago and is still incomplete. "Each year we are promised

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improvement but we see no improvement" said an Iraqi Army officer. Many interviewees complained that, when the British were in Basra in the 1920s, they built the port. But this time we have left nothing visible.

18. Most people in Basra city appear to have electricity for between 7 and 12 hours each day with a 3 hours on, 3 hours off pattern but there are variation between districts. Some believe that the political parties divert electricity to the areas where they enjoy most support. An interviewee in Al-Timiniya said that electricity in his district was on for 2 hours and off for 6 hours, depending on the time of year. In summer when air-conditioning units widens the gulf between demand and supply, gaps can last 8 hours at a time. Parts of rural Basra do not have access to electricity at all.
19. Mains water is not suitable for drinking and families that can afford it buy bottled water for drinking and washing. People are frustrated by the lack of improvement in sewage and rubbish collection services. The canals remain clogged with rubbish and in the poor areas houses still sit in pools of stagnant water and sewage.
20. Hospitals (many run by the Sadrists) are dirty, poorly staffed and equipped. Experienced doctors have left the country or been killed. Medicine is expensive and in short supply. Medicine administered in hospitals is often out of date. Medicine supplied by donors is frequently stolen and sold on the black market. Viagra, counterfeit or otherwise, is popular and widely available on the black market. 60% of those polled said they could get medical care for their family when they need it. But most well to do Basrawis try to go to hospitals abroad if they need serious medical treatment.
21. School standards are low. Parents complain that teachers are badly trained and poorly paid. Many have to do extra jobs to make ends meet. Parents have to pay for books, teaching materials and furniture. Basra has one of Iraq's biggest universities with 45,000 students. Teaching standards have suffered because many senior posts have been given to political appointees and lecturers face threats if they give low marks to students with political connections. But there is also pressure from more ambitious students for the introduction of new teaching methods and challenging curricula.

Perceptions of Freedom

22. People still rejoice in the political freedoms won in 2003 and praise the Coalition for removing Saddam Hussein. A female Provincial Councillor said that 'she breathes in freedom' every day. The overwhelming majority of Basrawis believe in democracy, freedom of speech and a free press. They also believe that a peaceful political process is the only legitimate way to resolve Iraq's current problems. There are a number of civil society organisations with some room for manoeuvre (human rights groups, women's groups, lawyers' associations etc). Female politicians celebrate the improvement in

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women's political rights thanks to the quota system that guarantees them a greater share of seats in the national and local government (33% under the CPA, 25% now), although NGO representatives complain that many of them are unqualified. Women activists at a recent women's conference sponsored by the Consulate were not shy about speaking out and talking to the media.

23. Asked what is the greatest improvement since the fall of the regime, many Shia cite the freedom to travel to shrines in Iran. However, perceptions of freedom differ depending on the religious philosophy, education and social class of the individual. The conservative Shia (the majority of them poor) feel liberated and protected by the dominance of the local and national Shia parties. Less conservative, middle class families rail against the ignorance and the power of those who claim religious authority to control their lives and talk about leaving Iraq. Some modern, educated women feel they are living under 'the Taleban'. One young woman, close to tears, asked us in the margins of our women's conference if we could help her to get out of Basra before British forces left.
24. Sunni families in Basra are generally middle class and feel doubly threatened by the dominance of the Shia masses. Relations between Sunnis and Shias in Basra have traditionally been close and the two communities live side by side all over the city, even in the Shia Flats. There is a lot of intermarriage. Many of the Sunni families who left Basra during the period of sectarian tension after the bombs in Basra and Samarra in early 2006 have now returned. Some of those who moved north to more Sunni dominated areas say they have returned to escape pressure from extremists to join the Sunni insurgency. But Sunnis still keep a low profile, with fewer attending Sunni mosques and some trying to blend into Shia neighbourhoods by hanging a black flag from their home during the Shia holy month of Ashura. They continue to work in middle class jobs in the public sector and as small businessmen but, in common with other professionals, many Sunni doctors, lawyers and academics left Basra after 2003.

Conclusion

25. There is an undeniable sense of desperation and gloom in Basra as the city watches criminals profit and good people suffer. The Provincial Council enjoys almost no credibility and respect for tackling issues that are important to ordinary people. As one unhappy member of the electorate told us "Under Saddam we had cotton wool in our mouths. Now the cotton wool has been taken and put in the ears of the authorities". However, despite having suffered so much over the last 30 years, and despite the perceived slow pace of progress over the last four, a degree of optimism persists. On all fronts, the polling indicates that Basrawis expect the city's fortunes to improve in the next year. Although many people are apathetic about their own ability to effect this change through the provincial elections, the mood may be beginning to change. Last weekend, 11,000 people turned out to support the first public meeting of the "Independent Basra Movement," a group of tribal sheikhs, religious leaders, NGOs and

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professionals who have called for a rejection of violence, corruption and sectarianism.
On the same day, only 100 people turned out to demonstrate against the arrest by US
forces of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's son.

Yours,

Rosalind

Rosalind Marsden
H M Consul-General, Basra

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