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7 November 2006

Bridget Brind
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Dear Bridget

SUBJECT: IRAQ: BASRA: LIFE FOR ORDINARY IRAQIS

1. You commissioned an account of what life is like for ordinary Basrawis. What follows is inevitably impressionistic given the severe security constraints under which we currently operate. We cannot go into ordinary Iraqi homes, shops and schools or move freely around the city (or even our own compound). Nearly all our local staff have left because of death threats and intimidation. Nevertheless, we have built up the following picture based on conversations with a range of ordinary Basrawis including academics, NGO workers, lawyers, businessmen, our LE kitchen staff and manual workers and Iraqi members of the PRT's Sectoral Working Groups. I am grateful to for much of the work on this report.

Security

2. Every Basrawi tells us that lack of security is their main concern. This impacts on daily life in various ways:

- Nobody trusts the police, who are seen as corrupt, linked to death squads, infiltrated by militias and in cahoots with IDF teams. Unable to trust the police, most Basrawis look to their extended family or tribe to provide security.
- Corruption in the provincial government and the Basra police force has encouraged the spread of crime.
- Those living near MNF sites in Basra city are worried about collateral damage from IDF attacks – mortars and rockets fired by JAM against coalition targets frequently go astray and fall on Iraqi homes causing death and injury.
- Locally engaged staff working for the Coalition receive death threats and live in constant fear of JAM, particularly following the recent mass murder of 17 interpreters

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and other staff working at the police training academy in Sha'iba. One of the PRT's Iraqi advisers (as lawyer) said that he had not even told his wife that he worked for us.

- Most Basrawis say that they want to see the back of militias and are disappointed that MNF has been unable to do more to constrain criminal and militia activity in the city. One former MP (now an independent) worried that, if MNF withdrew, Basra would be left at the mercy of criminals, gangs, militias and corrupt political parties: "If the British leave they will become monsters. It will be chaos." Others (those who listen to OMS/JAM propaganda) cannot wait to see us go.
- For Basra's Sunni minority (about 5% of the population), there is fear of sectarian violence. A number of Sunni families, many of them professionals, left Basra for Mosul and other Sunni areas after the Samarra shrine incident in February. Some are now coming back again, not because Basra has changed but to escape unwelcome pressure from Sunni extremists and because, while Basra is far from perfect, it is much better than Baghdad or some other parts of Iraq.

Economic activity

3. Unemployment in the formal sector is high, ranging from 40% to 70% in poor areas such as the Shia Flats. But this is partly offset by jobs in the cash/black economy. Basra has a very young population, with 50% of the population between the age of 17 and 25. High youth unemployment is a particular problem, making it easy for militias (and the Iranians) to recruit.

4. For those who do have jobs, wages have risen considerably since the fall of Saddam. But prices have risen too. The Basrawi dream is a salaried Government job. It is accepted that, to get such a job, the applicant must pay a bribe. Basra police recruits have reported paying up to $1,500 (five times the monthly wage for a teacher) to be put on a recruit training course.

5. There are no reliable statistics on investment in Basra. But money is clearly flowing in thanks to oil smuggling and Iranian investment. There are some signs around town of investment in property and the growth of small industry. Those involved in the smuggling mafia are making huge profits and building large houses. But there is an acute shortage of housing for the poor. The former regime stopped building social housing in Basra in the 1980s, despite continued population growth, particularly in areas like the Shia Flats where displaced Marsh Arabs have congregated. Since 2003, those who can afford to do so have been scrabbling to build new houses for themselves on open spaces in the city and surrounding farmland. But many of these new homes have been built without regard to safety standards, town planning or availability of basic services such as water supply and sewage.

Shops

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6. Far more goods are available in the shops than under Saddam when the borders with Iran and Kuwait were closed. There is a good selection of locally produced seasonal fruit and vegetables to be found in the markets: tomatoes and dates are a speciality in Basra. However there are occasional shortages due to the difficulty of transporting produce from Northern and Central Iraq. Sunnis are concerned about their personal security when delivering produce to majority Shia areas. This was particularly acute during Eid al-Fitr this year, when market supplies ran out before the end of the holiday period.

7. Petrol is generally available, at a fluctuating but affordable price – but much of the oil and refined derivatives find their way on to the black market and are smuggled out of the country via Iran and the Gulf. Several locally engaged members of staff say that the supply of bottled gas for cooking is erratic.

8. Immediately following the fall of the former regime, there was an influx of western electrical goods via Kuwait. Sales of air conditioning units, satellite TVs and computers have soared. But Basrawis complain that the shops are now full of poor quality and counterfeit goods imported from Iran and the Far East. Widespread looting following the invasion forced many long established merchants and tradesmen to shut up shop. Others have left because of protection rackets run by political party militias. Those who have come in to set up new businesses are seen as more interested in making a fast dinar than in the quality of their merchandise.

Basic services

9. In 2003, local infrastructure was in a state of near collapse after decades of under-investment and war damage. Emergency repairs and continued efforts to rehabilitate existing infrastructure averted collapse. But Basrawis are frustrated at the slow pace of improvement in basic services.

(a) Electricity supply has increased, but not by enough to keep up with demand. Basra gets more electricity than Baghdad but daily power outages remain a source of irritation. Outages are worse during the hot summer months (when air conditioners are all switched on), with a rotation system of 3 hours on, 3 hours off, though this varies from area to area. Now that the temperature has fallen, there are only three programmed outages a day, each of no more than one hour. One of our local contacts reported that, in the Al-Qurna district to the north of the city, there had been only a five-minute cut in the previous four days. The gaps in supply are filled by local enterprise. Some people buy and install private 250 MWT generators to supply electricity during blackouts, and sell this as a service to neighbours. Others hook up unofficial cables from their houses to take electricity from the distribution network

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(b) Water is available, but in short supply and of poor quality. The distribution network suffers from broken pipes and deliberate diversion of supplies. Water is not pumped to high-level water towers so those living in higher buildings in particular have difficulty obtaining water. Hand pumps often have to be used to draw water from the system. None of the water is fit to drink: drinking water is obtained from reverse osmosis stations in jerrycans.

(c) Refuse collection is improving slowly, but is still patchy: some areas still have no collection at all. Rubbish is collected and dumped temporarily in vacant lots with walls. In the absence of a permanent solution, these dumps are often extended rather than the rubbish moved on. In those areas with no collection, people have to pay private tractor owners to move their rubbish away.

(d) Health care is poor. For those who can pay, private sector hospitals provide an adequate level of care. But public sector hospitals and clinics are dirty, lacking in bed-space and chronically under-equipped. Equipment is stolen by employees and funds for new equipment siphoned off by corrupt officials. Staff often lack training to operate equipment provided by donors. Medicines are in short supply, although there is a flourishing black market in pharmaceuticals of dubious quality at an augmented price. One health clinic visited during Operation Sinbad could fit its annual supply of drugs into one carrier bag. Those medicines that are available are often of dubious quality. One of our LE staff recently visited a hospital that had been refurbished by the coalition. It was now dirty and full of rubbish.

(e) Local schools are dilapidated, refurbishment projects notwithstanding. One Basrawi reported that a local school building was used by three separate schools each taking turns on a shift basis. Schools are crowded and use outdated textbooks and teaching methods. That said an Iraqi teenager reported that schools are better than under the previous regime. And the increase in teachers' wages has improved staff morale.

(f) According to the head of the Law Faculty in Basra University, the higher education system, already in a bad state after years of neglect, has seen a further decline since 2003. Deans of faculties were sacked during the de-ba'athification programme, and replaced by unqualified political appointees. Many students have links to political parties and teaching staff find it difficult to prevent cheating or enforce university regulations because of militia intimidation. There have been some improvements - internet access, furniture and links to other universities – but these are outweighed by the breakdown of respect.

Recreation

10. Options for recreation are limited. Cinemas and theatres are closed. City parks are dilapidated and favourite picnic spots of happier days are too dangerous to visit.

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Some people still go to the corniche but Basrawis complain that nowadays it is dominated by groups of threatening youths and no longer a salubrious place for families. People used to enjoy eating out in the evenings, but are too scared to be out late. Now people are more likely to stay at home watching TV via their recently acquired satellite dishes – news and politics are favourite viewing. When asked about their everyday life, most Basrawis want to talk about politics. As one said, 'everyday life *is* politics.'

Religion

11. Basra's overwhelmingly Shia population enjoy greater religious freedom since the fall of Saddam. People used to think twice before entering a mosque in Basra in case they were spotted and had their name recorded. Most of Basra's Shias defer to al-Sistani's authority, a minority follow the Shaikh'iya and a significant number (poorer, less educated), take their lead from Sadrist mosques. Friday prayers outside OMS headquarters in Basra attract thousands of people and are a platform for promoting an overtly political anti-MNF agenda. Historically, Basra has been a relatively open, tolerant city where Shias and Sunnis have long coexisted. But many Sunnis have been afraid to attend their mosques, particularly following since the Samarra shrine incident.

Women

12. There has been an increasing trend towards wearing headscarves in Basra over the last 20 years. Since 2003 it has been rare to see a women with her head uncovered. Wearing the hijab is no longer a matter of personal choice. A university professor told us of a recent incident where a group of women were physically intimidated on the street for not wearing headscarves and teenagers have similarly been harassed for wearing 'inappropriate' clothing. An administrator of a local orphanage said: "Women have more religious and social freedom in Mecca than they currently do in Basra." Probably an overstatement, but it indicates the frustration that many women feel.

13. Despite these social restrictions, women professionals can still pursue their careers. When I visited DFID's Al Hartha power station project, I met several senior women engineers who had been working there for several decades. There are now several women judges in Basra (two of whom are about to visit the UK). One of them told me that, in the legal profession, opportunities for women had improved: prior to 2003, women had not been allowed to become judges. But for most women who want to work, the main constraints are insecurity, high unemployment and lack of childcare.

The public mood

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14. Most Basrawis say they feel pessimistic about the future. They have turned inward, trusting their families first and their tribes second. They have no faith in the provincial government or the police (although the national government and the Iraqi Army commands slightly more confidence). Unrealistically high expectations in 2003 about what the Coalition could deliver have given way to disappointment and gloom. A local university professor said that the most worrying thing he saw in Basra was a sense of hopelessness: people no longer believed that the situation would improve. But this pessimism is not universal. One LE member of staff said: "Saddam has gone. Those creating the problems want to stay in the dark – but they are in a minority. The majority are looking to build a better future."

Conclusion

15. Operation Sinbad may have offered a glimmer of hope, reflected in improved levels of public consent for MNF. Last-mile provision of water and electricity, job creation schemes, DFID's infrastructure projects etc will all make a difference to the lives of ordinary Basrawis. But Op Sinbad/Better Basra will not be enough to transform the lives of two million people. With its huge oil reserves, Basra is potentially a wealthy city. Life for ordinary Basrawis will only really change when the security situation improves sufficiently to attract large-scale private and public sector investment and there is greater transparency and accountability in spending public money (which could be an important part of our legacy).

Yours ever,

Rosalind

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