

GulfWire

Perspectives



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Iraq According to Al-Jazeera, U.S. Senator John S. McCain, and Dr. John Duke Anthony

Editor's Note:

U.S. Senator John S. McCain delivered a major address on Iraq last week when, on Wednesday, November 5, he spoke to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) on Iraq. His remarks were "on the record." This past weekend, the Senator's remarks and recommendations were the subject of much comment and analysis in the mainstream American media, including the major Sunday television network talk shows. Immediately following the Senator's address and the discussion that ensued, Qatar's Al-Jazeera, the Arab world's foremost satellite television network, interviewed CFR member Dr. John Duke Anthony. GulfWire is pleased to present an edited and unofficial version of the interview.

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Al-Jazeera: Dr. Anthony, you were in the meeting with Senator McCain that just concluded. What do you think of what he had to say?

JDA: In addressing issues related to Iraq, he couldn't have picked a timelier and more relevant topic for which he is better-suited.

Al-Jazeera: Why is that?

JDA: For most Americans who follow national political affairs, Senator McCain is a household name. He was formerly a candidate for President of the United States. He remains an important Member of Congress. In two of Congress' most important committees, the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, the second of which he is the chairman, he's a key policymaker. He has an abiding concern for America's national security and related international interests. What he has to say about what we are and are not doing in Iraq is therefore of special importance.

Al-Jazeera: How do you assess what he had to say?

JDA: My reactions are mixed. He made several important points. He offered some very good

insights. One was his view about how the situation in Iraq may not be as usefully compared to Vietnam as many observers these days are saying. Neither, for that matter, in his view, is it as usefully compared to postwar Germany or Japan. He may be right that a better analogy is France in the aftermath of Nazi German rule, but many will find such an analogy to be quite a stretch.

On the other hand, what he said with such passion at the end of his remarks about the root causes of terrorism in the Mideast was neither new nor very helpful.

Al-Jazeera: In what way?

JDA: On that issue, what he had to say did little to enlighten anyone. He did nothing more than repeat how unemployed Arab youth are the easiest recruits to Al-Qaeda and other groups that engage in political violence. While undoubtedly true in terms of what is a contributing if not driving factor for many recruits, of equal if not far greater importance is that Al-Qaeda's top leadership is far from being poor; it is solidly middle class. It is not motivated by forces or factors related to poverty. To focus on what may motivate many of a movement's followers but not what drives its leaders, or on what motivates and drives the one but not the other, is hardly helpful.

The Senator made no mention, for example, of the linkage that exists in the eyes of many specialists between acts of terrorism directed against the United States, on one hand, and the well-known region-wide anger, especially among leaders, at U.S. Mideast policies, on the other. But in his choosing not to make such a linkage, there's nothing new in that regard, either. It seems that, in this instance, as with many others, there's a self-imposed gag order among public figures as to whether it is appropriate to raise and address the issues that such linkages suggest.

Al-Jazeera: What do you mean?

JDA: He did not acknowledge what, with regard to what drives many acts of Arab and Islamic terrorism, respectable and scientific poll after poll after poll, together with the commentary of many respected observers and specialists, have been indicating for quite some time.

Al-Jazeera: And what is that?

JDA: For some time now, one public opinion survey after another has reflected increasing and broad-based agreement that the anger of Arabs and Muslims worldwide against the United States is rooted not in poverty or unemployment and neither is it anchored in revulsion against many of America's values or its freedoms. Yet, despite this, and against mounting evidence to the contrary, some of the Administration and Congress' most prominent leaders continue to say these and all kinds of other things about why so many people abroad are angry with the United States. What they are saying in this regard is simply not true. That leaders will repeatedly insist or imply that American policies are not the main issue, that they will emphatically posit that other, quite different reasons are the primary cause, is not only inaccurate and misleading. It is irresponsible. And it enlightens no one.

Al-Jazeera: Then what is the problem?

JDA: Numerous polls indicate that very large numbers of Arabs and Muslims not only do not hate democratic values and many of the freedoms that many Americans enjoy. The polls indicate that the opposite is nearer the truth – that Arabs and Muslims by and large admire such values and freedoms and much else that is identified with America and Americans. Instead, it is far more frequently the case that American policies on regional issues of profound importance to Arabs and Muslims are cited as the main reason for increasing numbers of Arabs and Muslims’ growing alienation from the United States.

But in listening to Senator McCain’s passionate focus on poverty and unemployment as the main factors, one would have no idea that something else, namely American policies toward the Mideast, is of far greater importance in explaining what is driving acts of terrorism against the United States. With his and other prominent officials’ being unwilling to focus on this other aspect, it seems a collective self-imposed silence is in effect.

Al-Jazeera: What do you mean?

JDA: What I mean is this. I know of no major American national public official who is willing to acknowledge, let alone seriously address, the U.S. foreign policy dimensions that so antagonize and offend international leaders and that, in the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world in particular, comprise a far more fundamental aspect of what drives Arab and Islamic anger against the United States. It’s as though our leaders feel intimidated. It’s as if they are afraid to speak the truth. A result is that, in the nation’s capital, any serious discussion of what lies behind many of the violent attacks against American assets and interests abroad or here in the United States is, in effect, largely fenced off from public debate because high-ranking officials in the Administration and the Congress have decided to censor themselves in advance.

Al-Jazeera: Switching subjects, what do you think of the growing number of Republicans within the Congress who are expressing their displeasure with the Administration over what is happening in Iraq?

JDA: Many seem to be saying there’s a limit – that only up to a point are they willing to listen respectfully, or in silence, to rationales and justifications that, after all these months, are of such questionable authenticity. For some, it’s a reaction to how Administration leaders insisted that Iraq was an imminent threat to the United States. For others, it’s rooted in what, since the invasion in March, has been revealed as a more realistic picture of the true nature, extent, and actual existence -- or the non-existence -- of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

For many, it’s a reaction to how some of the Administration’s influential advisers, in the run-up to the war in March, likened the task of subduing Iraq to a “cakewalk.” For still others, it’s their taking exception to the view that the victory of the world’s most powerful armed forces over an ill-equipped and dispirited army that had been routed in 1991, and that never recovered, is likely to go down as “one of the greatest military victories in American history.”

Al-Jazeera: But do you agree with Senator McCain that the situation in Iraq would be

improved if the United States were to send more troops?

JDA: What he had to say regarding that point was important. But two things are at issue here. One has to do with quantity. The Senator specifically called for the sending of an additional division of troops to Iraq. This raises a question. Where is such a division going to come from? A report on the Lou Dobbs [CNN] show last night, if accurate, would indicate that such a recommendation is not realistic. If what the Senator meant was to send an additional fully intact division of forces currently on active duty in the United States – he did not indicate whether he meant this or the equivalent of same drawn from different units – one has reason to question the feasibility of what he proposes.

The Dobbs Report emphasized that there are currently 10 U.S. army divisions deployed abroad. [The Report also said that, of 18 army divisions in existence in the United States in 1991, only 11 exist today]. The report said that there is but one full division of U.S. army troops remaining in the United States, namely the First Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas. If so, can one really imagine sending the sole remaining active duty American army division within the United States abroad at this time? What country, similarly situated, would likely do what the Senator recommends?

The second issue is quality. It has to do with the need for certain kinds of troops [in Iraq] more than others. In this case, there is a premium on specialists with much-needed human intelligence and linguistic skills, on deployed personnel that can exhibit an awareness, appreciation, and detailed knowledge of and respect for another people's culture, history, and heritage, on forces that, beyond knowing the language, have an ability to empathize with another people's needs, concerns, interests, relations, and objectives in addition to their own.

It's in this area, among others, where, at present, we are especially weak and hurting. If large numbers of our troops in Iraq have to have an interpreter or translator in order to locate where the bathroom is, or to have one's commands to non-English speaking Arabs understood and obeyed, one has an indication of an important part of the situation at hand.

Al-Jazeera: What more can be done?

JDA: There's a larger picture here that many are not seeing. Many things in Iraq are broken. The United States, as the primary controlling power, and whether alone or in concert with others, needs to address them; it has no other choice. A useful window on what we are presently facing in Iraq consists of our being unable, thus far, to come to grips with the policy implications of more than half a dozen very important phenomena. For the most part, each was in play up until the middle of last March. Since the invasion and occupation, however, most of these pieces are missing. Their absence – and in one important case, the presence and growing pervasiveness of one phenomena that did not exist before -- goes a long way towards explaining the situation we are in.

Al-Jazeera: What are they?

JDA: Three of the missing pieces have to do with key attributes of countries. They're enshrined

as core principles of the United Nations Charter. All who belong to the UN, upon entry, agree to do their utmost to ensure that three attributes of their fellow members remain intact: namely, their national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. Before the March invasion, all three of these attributes were more or less intact in the case of Iraq. Since March, as a result of what the Allied coalition did, none of the three have been in place. At least, they are not in place to the extent they were before. What is worse, their restoration is nowhere in sight. And in the eyes of more than a few, we're the ones that are the most to blame.

Lying largely at our feet is blame for the fact that four other criteria that are key to a country's successful governance are also lacking. Each is linked to what every national government must accomplish if it wants to remain in power -- if it wants to underscore and demonstrate its legitimacy and credibility. One is to ensure that the country's domestic security/stability is assured. It's not just that many Iraqis are arguing that we are not doing that and that the evidence is there for all to see; it's that many others, including many of our own leaders, agree.

A second requirement for every government is to provide for effective external defense -- otherwise, would-be foreign adventurers are going to be tempted to enter the country with a view to seizing the country's natural resources and any of its other valuable assets or with a view to aiding and abetting sabotage and instability or another country's or group's agenda. Large numbers of Iraqis, and many others, too, despair of seeing an early ability of our or other foreign forces being able to assure the country's external defense -- a defense that was assured before last March but not since.

A third crucial ingredient for success that is missing has to do with a people's economic well-being -- working people everywhere need to be assured not only of the continuation of their food, shelter, and clothing, their basic necessities, so to speak, but of the certainty that they have, or soon will have, a chance to improve their material lot. Too many Iraqis feel we have yet to demonstrate that there is a reasonable chance that we will be able to meet their and their family's personal needs, let alone the country's national needs, on this front anytime soon.

The fourth piece of extraordinary importance that is also largely missing to date in key areas of Iraq is an effective national system of civil and criminal justice. People who have been wronged or injured in any society want to be assured that they can and will achieve redress and recompense in a manner that is legal, civil, and peaceful. Otherwise, the opposite -- violence and revenge, or so-called "vigilante justice" -- is certain to take hold. In light of the looting and lawlessness that came in the wake of the March invasion, few would conclude other than that success or even adequate progress on this score remains elusive. In the eyes of too many Iraqis, all of these essential attributes of a successfully functioning system of national governance have been dealt a setback -- they've been largely lacking, or insufficiently present, since March.

Lastly, there is one more matter that, from an Islamic perspective, is of greater importance than all the others. It has to do with a government's ability to avoid, or effectively guard against, what in Arabic is known as fitna. The English equivalent is chaos or anarchy. An Islamic government's leader has no greater civic obligation and moral duty than to assure the country's citizens that, in their person, in their family, and with regard to their property, they are safe and secure. Failing this, which is always the case in circumstances where fitna reigns, which is too

often the case where insecurity is the rule -- as is currently the case in important parts of Iraq -- little that is noble or of value, and even less of what might be pleasing to one's Almighty, is possible.

Fitna was introduced to Iraq and the Iraqi people last March. It shows no sign of early abatement. This is one of the biggest reasons of all why the work in front of everyone who would do right in and by Iraq could not be more important.

Al-Jazeera: Thank you very much.

* Dr. John Duke Anthony is President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Secretary of the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee, and Publisher of GulfWire as well as Saudi--American Forum. All four are nongovernmental and nonprofit educational institutions based in Washington D.C. and dedicated to enhancing understanding and knowledge of American interests and involvement in the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

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