

US in Iraq: How to get the endgame right

If the US wants to ensure success in Iraq, it must support cultural exchange programs such as the Iraqi Women's Fellowship Foundation.

By Bradford Higgins / May 12, 2010

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With nearly a trillion dollars spent, more than 4,000 US troops and 100,000 Iraqis killed, and long-term success far from assured, getting the endgame right in Iraq will probably define American foreign policy for many years to come.

That's why, despite the success of Iraq's recent elections and the imminent drawdown of US forces there, the United States needs to reflect on its dismal record in similar endgames, from Vietnam in 1975, to Afghanistan in 1989, and Iraq in 1991 – and then consider the role of women.

In its purest form, the war on terror is a war over ideas and values. Education is one of its most important and effective frontline weapons. Unfortunately, millions of Iraqis, including an entire generation of youth, know nothing of American ideas and values; their limited encounters are with heavily armed US troops in armored vehicles.

During the cold war, Fulbright programs, international visitor exchanges, and similar public and private educational and cultural programs created four decades of friends for the US.

Thousands of those friends rose to senior government and private-sector positions in their own countries. Even then, such funding paled in comparison with US war funding.

Now such educational exchange programs seem to be almost nonexistent compared with the level of US military funding. This is a huge mistake.

The enormous political and diplomatic value of such education programs has certainly not been lost on other nations.

At one end of this spectrum are extremist-funded religious schools (madrasas) that proselytize radical views, creating a steady and growing stream of terrorists. At the other end of the spectrum consider Iran: It has been estimated that for every Iraqi studying in the US, 100 are studying in Tehran. One can only wonder what type of influence 500 US-trained Iraqi managers and teachers will have in five years compared with the 50,000 trained in Iran.

This wide disparity in commitment to cultural education may very well become a "missile gap," one that the Obama administration and Congress need to address now if they are to win the Iraq endgame. And nowhere in Iraq is this critical imbalance more out of whack – or represents a greater return on investment – than with Iraq's women.

The critical role Iraqi women played in establishing the new government is best reflected in Iraq's passage of constitutional provisions reserving 25 percent of seats in parliament for women. But it was Iraq's first free election, in December 2004, that will forever define their extraordinary contribution to Iraq's future. It also represents one of democracy's finest hours.

Predictions of massive casualties at the polling centers led to real fears that voters would stay home and the election would fail.

To the astonishment of many, and despite numerous acts of violence, it was the older Iraqi women who were the first to appear, and, after casting their own ballots, they returned with their daughters so they could vote. Only later did their husbands and sons start to appear in large numbers to vote.