


CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

16 March 2004

Iraqi Public Opinion: What Can We Learn About the Status of Key US Objectives in Iraq?

A Conference Report

OTI IA 2004-015

**Iraqi Public Opinion: What Can We Learn
About the Status of Key US Objectives in
Iraq?**

A Conference Report [redacted]

Key Findings [redacted]

Publicly available surveys of Iraqi opinion are providing general insights into public views but offer limited information on the process of key US policy goals. The surveys are roughly consistent on a few key issues:

- *There is a widespread belief that US intentions in Iraq are different than those US officials publicly state.* Several surveys indicated Iraqis believe the key US objective is to gain access to Iraq's oil.
- *Iraqis do not view the democratic process in the same way many Americans do.* Many respondents distrust political parties and believe that Islam should have a prominent role in any democracy.
- *Iraqis support a government that responds to citizen needs and that promotes freedom of speech, assembly, and worship.* They are currently more interested in social stability, public order, and jobs, however, than in abstract concepts such as democratization. [redacted]

The surveys are not yet providing the more tactical information that would be useful in informing US policies, according to participants at a recent CIA conference. In the absence of traditional economic and governance indicators for Iraq, however, public opinion surveys are one of the few methodological tools that potentially can "quantify" the success of US policies.

- Public opinion polling is new in Iraq and is being undertaken in a rapidly evolving environment; experts are still working out the best way to conduct polls and interpret the data they provide.
- The surveys currently provide few insights into which individuals wield influence on Iraqi public opinion and are just now developing baselines to identify events that are likely to precipitate mass action. [redacted]

Conference participants were confident that refinements in polling strategies— [redacted]

[redacted]—can generate more "actionable" information on the success of US strategies.

- Participants suggested refining the polling questions, increasing the use of focus groups to back up poll data, improving coordination among polling organizations, and more carefully identifying the key objectives of individual polling efforts. [redacted]



Iraqi Public Opinion: What Can We Learn About the Status of Key US Objectives in Iraq?
A Conference Report [redacted]

On 18 December, the [redacted] of the CIA's Office of Transnational Issues assembled a group of experts with recent experience on the ground in Iraq to discuss publicly available surveys of Iraqi attitudes. [redacted]

- In the absence of traditional economic and governance indicators, public opinion surveys are currently the only methodological tool available for objectively "quantifying" the success of US policies in Iraq.
- Because public opinion polling is new in Iraq and is being undertaken under rapidly evolving social and economic conditions, experts are still working out the most effective way to conduct polls and interpret the data collected. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Surveys Provide General Insights on Iraqi Perceptions... [redacted]

Conference participants agreed that findings from all of the surveys were roughly consistent on a few key issues, a possible indication that the surveys are a reasonably accurate reflection of Iraqi opinions on selected topics:¹

- *There is a lack of trust in the United States and its objectives in Iraq.* [redacted]

¹ Because each poll was conducted in different areas of the country using different questions, experts cannot be certain that this convergence is not coincidental or the result of factors unrelated to the convergence of opinions. [redacted]

This assessment was prepared by the Office of Transnational Issues and Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the [redacted] OTI, on [redacted]



[redacted]

and of polls targeting elites, pollsters generally are unable to determine which elites have the ability to affect change through concrete actions.

- *Iraqis generally support a government that is fair and responsive to citizen needs and that encourages democratic ideals such as freedom of speech and worship and regular elections.* [redacted]

- The volatility of Iraq's civil society limits the extent to which pollsters can design surveys that provide insights into the propensity for a majority of Iraqis to undertake concrete actions that could undermine or bolster US objectives.

- Pollsters are just now getting baselines and are not yet able to track, in a methodologically sound manner, the factors that change opinions. [redacted]

[redacted]

Publicly available opinion surveys also often do not provide information on what is driving many Iraqi opinions, thereby reducing the surveys' usefulness in helping US policy makers design concrete solutions to problem areas or reinforce efforts in areas of success.

- *All of the surveys and anecdotal reports indicate that the prime concerns for the average Iraqi are food, shelter, electricity, and security.* [redacted]

- Most pollsters that have completed public opinion surveys over the past year have not repeated the same poll with the same questions to determine whether survey findings reflect enduring opinions or snapshots in time. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

...But Polling Inconsistencies Limit "Actionable" Information [redacted]

Conference participants thought the polls and surveys provided little concrete evidence of the extent to which the United States is failing or succeeding at reaching its goals:

- Due to the lack of public opinion surveys designed to identify Iraq's key power brokers on many issues

[redacted]

Cultural and Social Differences Skew Poll Interpretation [redacted]

Conference participants stressed that cultural and social differences between those who use the polls (Westerners) and those who respond to them (Iraqis) complicate their interpretation.

[redacted] Iraqis and Americans interpret terms such as "citizenship," "democracy," and "secularism" differently and from entirely different points of reference. Conference participants noted, for example, that many Iraqis associate the word democracy with Saddam's Ba'th party, which usurped the term to gain legitimacy.

- The type of political system most favored by Iraqis also is unclear in relation to the role of Islam. Individuals in several surveys, for example, thought Islam should have a prominent role in a future Iraqi state, but were also supportive of democracy. Many described a preference for "Islamic democracy".

[redacted]

Increasing the "Actionable" Information in Iraqi Opinion Surveys [redacted]

Participants suggested four enhancements to current surveys and analytic methods to increase the "actionable" information they provide: refining the questions, paying more attention to the factors in both Iraq and globally that will drive Iraqi public opinion and expectations, enhancing coordination among pollsters, and maintaining a sophisticated understanding of US policy objectives. [redacted]

Refining the Questions

Many of the questions included in the public opinion surveys cited at the conference—such as on democratization or on what individuals believe will

happen three to five years from now—are too abstract to identify how US strategies are faring.

- Participants thought that asking more direct questions about individuals' daily lives would provide more insight into Iraqi views of the United States and enable US officials to quickly identify problem areas. Basic questions—such as: Does your local council have enough money and is it doing what needs to be done? Are you able to feed your family? Do you have a voice in local politics?—would give US officials a good idea of Iraqi grievances at any given time and facilitate more targeted solutions.
- Using open-ended questions and focus groups could elicit more solid input from Iraqi citizens on what they believe is best for the future, giving US officials a better understanding of potential Iraqi reactions to US policies. The group suggested asking questions such as: What would you like the Coalition Provisional Authority to do that it currently is not doing? On what should the coalition be spending its money? How should the ownership of Iraq's oil industry be managed? [redacted]

Clarifying Objectives of the Polls

All participants agreed that designing polls that provide "actionable" information requires that those designing and using the polls have clear and specific objectives. A poll whose aim was to determine the level of support for particular Iraqi political leaders, for example, would require different questions than one whose aim was to determine the level of political stability. [redacted]

Coordinating Polling Efforts

All of the conference participants agreed that polling organizations would have much richer and more actionable findings if they worked together more closely to coordinate their efforts in the field [redacted]



Tracking Drivers of Iraqi Public Opinion

Many different factors drive Iraqi—as any other—public opinion at any given time, but polling and focus group experts generally have not yet done enough work in Iraq to discover which factors are key and why. In the few cases where this information is available, providing it in poll write-ups would assist in clarifying the implications of Iraqi public opinion. Participants stressed the need to pay attention to both the manner in which developments globally and in the United States—including the 2004 elections—affect Iraqi public opinion and also Iraqi willingness to support key US objectives.

- Experience with polling in other volatile countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Afghanistan, where polling infrastructures are either nonexistent or poorly developed, indicates it can take a year or longer to design opinion surveys that are able to gauge opinion countrywide and relatively accurately track some of its drivers. [redacted]