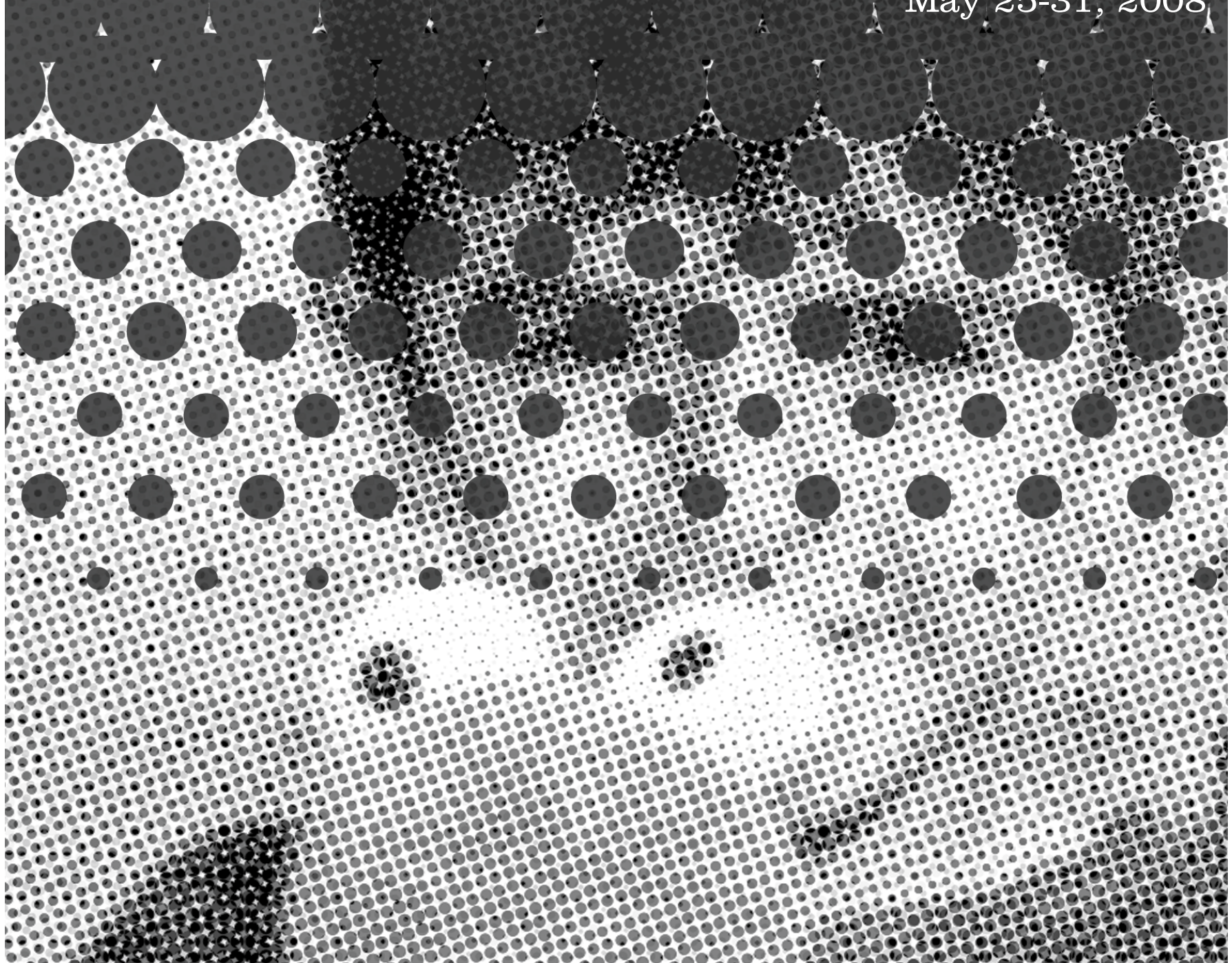


The Morning Word

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The Real Cost of an Unjust War

Iraq's Youth in a Time of Turmoil

by Jonathan Powers

According to news reports from Baghdad, a group of armed assailants recently stormed into a classroom and beheaded two teachers in front of their students, who were only eight or nine years old. While the accounts provided by witnesses differed on some details, this grisly incident starkly demonstrates the constant violence and fear that Iraq's youth face on a daily basis. Beyond the violence, Iraqi youth face many additional challenges, including shortages of food supplies, clean water, electricity, and medical supplies, as well as limited educational opportunities and employment prospects. Facing all of this misery, Iraqi youth are forced to struggle for survival in a war-torn nation.

Out-of-school youth, disenfranchised youth, ex-combatants, and other vulnerable groups of school-age youth represent the social capital on which the future of Iraq depends. With the right opportunities, Iraq's youth can contribute to their own healthy development as well as to their nation's public revitalization and long-term economic growth. But now, faced with limited opportunities and inadequate support, many youth are becoming paid-for-hire insurgents and entering a vicious cycle of war and terror.

Historically, foreign soldiers have interacted closely with the youth of the nations in which they are fighting. Soldiers' weapons offer an element of mystery and intrigue that attracts the curious children. The youths' attitudes toward soldiers reflect the broader views of their communities. When the community sees foreign soldiers in a positive light, the children are welcoming. This was the case, for example, during both world wars, as American soldiers gave their rations of candy bars to children who lined the streets to greet them. When the community is suspicious or hostile toward foreign troops, the attitudes of youth reflect this. Children have been known to provide information to enemy sources on soldier locations or be used as distractions during ambushes.

For the soldiers fighting in Iraq, it is no different. As someone who spent more than 14 months with the U.S. military in Iraq, I witnessed firsthand this evolution in popular attitudes, as reflected in the treatment we received from Iraqi youth. I served as a member of the Army's 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division.

We "Gunners," convoyed into Baghdad, Iraq, in late May 2003 as the 1st Armored Division received the mission to replace the war-hardened 3rd Infantry Division and execute peacekeeping operations in Baghdad. The Gunners were assigned to the Adhamiya district in Baghdad and based their operations out of Uday Hussein's Palace along the Eastern Bank of the Tigris River.

My platoon patrolled the streets in these neighborhoods, providing security, collecting information, manning checkpoints, raiding weapon caches, implementing reconstruction projects, and interacting with the Iraqi people in a variety of ways. Initially, both the Iraqi population and U.S. soldiers held high expectations. Unfortunately, entering Baghdad, most soldiers spoke little or no Arabic and lacked an understanding of Iraqi society and culture.

In a conversation with an Iraqi youth shortly after Coalition forces toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, I heard that Iraqis viewed Americans as a liberating force that would provide a better livelihood for those who had suffered repression and economic hardship under Saddam. A 23-year-old boy, Ahmed (whose last name will be withheld for security reasons),

said: "America has gone to the moon. They should be able to do anything for us." The common belief among Iraqis was that problems related to electricity, sewage, waste collection, and clean water would soon be solved and that the country would be standing on its feet again.

As the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority, attempted to organize itself and implement plans to manage Iraq, soldiers provided most Iraqi civilians with their first exposure to Americans. Iraqi children soon learned that these strange men and women were good sources of candy, bottled water, or leftovers from their Meals Ready to Eat. When the summer heat began to wear down morale, and the Coalition Provisional Authority's promises of garbage pickup, sewage treatment, or more consistent electricity failed to materialize, many of these relationships changed. Children in neighborhoods that were unfriendly toward the Americans became notorious for throwing rocks at convoys. Stories began to emerge of children being used as a method of attacking soldiers. According to one report, a young child at Baghdad University walked up behind a soldier on patrol and, using a handgun, shot the American in

the back of his head, killing him instantly.

The engagement with Iraq's youth, however, did not cease. Soldiers began to see the darker side of child exploitation, as night patrols noticed children as young as eight years old breaking curfew and sleeping outside the propane station so they would be the first in line to purchase their rations of propane. Propane is the main cooking and heating fuel in Iraq and is hard to find. These young boys' parents were forcing them to spend the night at the propane shop so they could be first in line to buy cans and then sell them on the black market. When the patrols discovered this, they forced the boys home by following them as they kicked their propane cans down the street. On most occasions we found angry parents greeting their sons, whom they had sent out on the streets at night.

As we "Gunnery" became the targets of ever increasing violence and began taking heavy casualties, our regular orphanage visits provided a break from the harsh reality. Even during one of the worst weeks, when the unit lost two soldiers on Dec. 22 and the Brigade lost its Command Sergeant Major on Christmas Eve, the Battalion still pushed for the Christmas Day visits with the orphans, knowing that the experience would lift spirits.

Unfortunately, this proved to be one of our final visits to the orphanages because on the next visit the Battalion was asked not to come back. After we took a patrol to St. Hannah's Orphanage in early 2004, the head caretaker told me that we should not return because they had received a threat the week before. The nun warned me, "They said if they see us working with the Americans, they will kill the kids!" Other than the days when I lost comrades, that day looms as the darkest of my 14 months in Iraq. Over the next few months we tried to protect the orphanages and get supplies to the orphans through informal channels. However, as

violence increased and Muqtada al-Sadr's militia began its uprising in the spring of 2004, the Battalion's priorities changed to fighting for survival. During this time it became obvious that there was little to be done to support these kids, much as we wished it were otherwise.

Numerous veterans of the war in Iraq tell similar stories of their experiences with children in the war zone. Engaging Iraqi youth is one of the common threads that soldiers who patrol the streets share. Many come back wishing they could do more to provide assistance and opportunities to this next generation, the future of Iraq.

Following decades of tyranny under the previous regime, the war in Iraq has left millions of Iraqi children out of school and civically disengaged from normal youth activities. Iraq's his-

cent under 25 years old. These numbers represent, in a nation whose life expectancy is 68.7 years, a civilization that lost a generation to war and violence, in part to the Iran-Iraq War, and continues to lose many to the current conflict. These young people face the daily threat of violence and bloodshed while struggling to receive adequate health care for both physical and mental health needs, proper educational opportunities, and generalized domestic care. This struggle has produced an ever-growing loss of innocence, as their dreams of a better future become lost in a grim reality. Insecurity has made it increasingly difficult to gauge the effects of this war on Iraq's children. Although data are often untrustworthy and incomplete, recent reports demonstrate declining physical and mental

going hungry, a figure that doubled to 8 percent in 2006. Saving Children from War, a Europe-based aid agency, recently reported that children in Basra are dying of diarrhea as a result of increased water-borne disease infections and lack of proper medical supplies. Dr. Haydar Salah, a pediatrician at the Basra Children's Hospital, was quoted as saying that "the mortality of children in Basra has increased by nearly 30 percent compared to the Saddam Hussein era. Children are dying daily, and no one is doing anything to help them." According to the report, unsafe water, diarrhea, malnutrition, infectious diseases, maternal stress, and poverty are the primary causes of high infant mortality.

The mental condition of Iraqi youth is equally worsening. In February 2006, the Association of Psychologists of Iraq (API) released a study based on interviews with more than 1,000 children countrywide. The study found that Iraqi youth are suffering grave mental health problems as a result of the widespread violence. The report noted an increase in the number of children seeking psychological counseling, as well as an increase in those experiencing learning difficulties. Among those examined, 92 percent were found to have learning impediments that can be connected to the "current climate of fear and insecurity." Kidnappings, explosions, sounds of helicopters, foreign troops, nighttime raids, checkpoints, and other wartime activities take a toll on this young population. According to API spokesman Maruan Abdullah, "the only things they have on their minds are guns, bullets, death, and a fear of the U.S. occupation."

Dealing with the problem has not been easy. Funding and government support for initiatives to deal with these problems have faded. Iraqi Ministry of Health officials blame the spending freeze that has emerged from the delays in forming a stable

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—Dr. Haydar Salah, pediatrician

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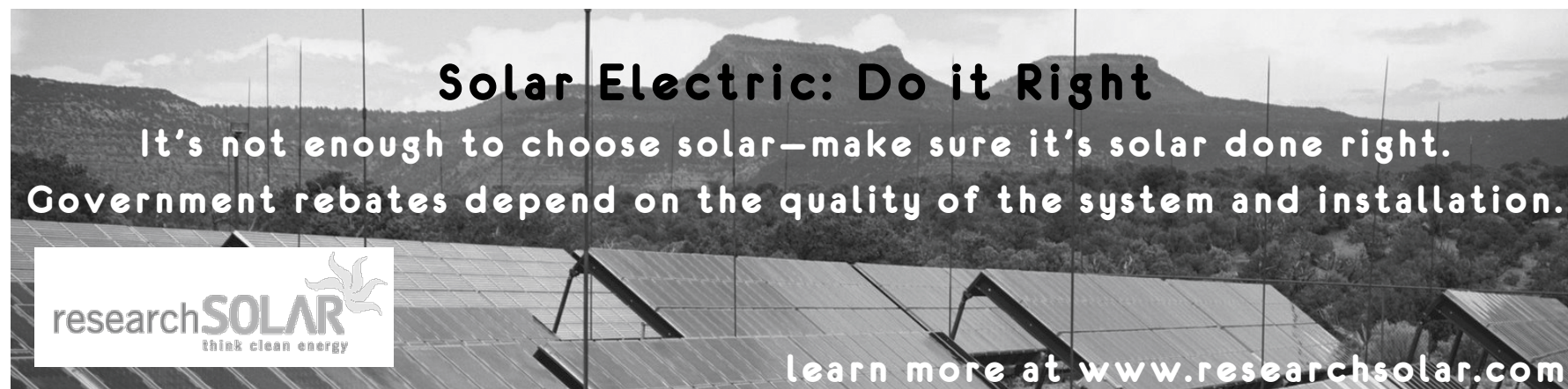
—Maruan Abdullah, API spokesman

tory of conflict and repression, sanctions, dictatorship, and now foreign occupation have limited, and in many cases eliminated, normal opportunities for Iraqi children to receive an education, become productive members of Iraqi society, and contribute to their country's development.

The U.S. Census Bureau now estimates that Iraq's population is more than 26 million people, with about 40 percent of Iraqis under 14 years old and 61 per-

cent under 25 years old. These numbers represent, in a nation whose life expectancy is 68.7 years, a civilization that lost a generation to war and violence, in part to the Iran-Iraq War, and continues to lose many to the current conflict. These young people face the daily threat of violence and bloodshed while struggling to receive adequate health care for both physical and mental health needs, proper educational opportunities, and generalized domestic care. This struggle has produced an ever-growing loss of innocence, as their dreams of a better future become lost in a grim reality. Insecurity has made it increasingly difficult to gauge the effects of this war on Iraq's children. Although data are often untrustworthy and incomplete, recent reports demonstrate declining physical and mental

health, lower educational attainment, and rising violence against youth. The physical health of Iraq's youth is deteriorating, largely due to the lack of access to food, clean water, and health care. A recent United Nations Human Rights Commission report stated that malnutrition rates in Iraqi children under five have almost doubled since the U.S.-led invasion. Under Saddam Hussein, nearly 4 percent of Iraqi children under five were



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by Robert Kaplan

Global View

Myanmar in Crisis: Cyclone Nargis and a Military Junta

More than 60,000 people may have died as a result of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, and at least 1.5 million are homeless or otherwise in desperate need of assistance. The Burmese military junta, one of the most morally repulsive in the world, has allowed in only a trickle of aid supplies. The handful of United States Air Force C-130 flights from Utapao Air Base here in Thailand is little more than symbolic, given the extent of the need.

France's foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, has spoken of the possibility of an armed humanitarian intervention, and there is an increasing degree of chatter about the possibility of an American-led invasion of the Irrawaddy River Delta.

As it happens, American armed forces are now gathered in large numbers in Thailand for the annual multinational military exercise known as Cobra Gold. This means that Navy warships could pass from the Gulf of Thailand through the Strait of Malacca and north up the Bay of Bengal to the Irrawaddy Delta. It was a similar circumstance that had allowed for Navy intervention after the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004.

Because oceans are vast and even warships travel comparatively slowly, one should not

underestimate the advantage that fate has once again handed us. For example, a carrier strike group, or even a smaller Marine-dominated expeditionary strike group headed by an amphibious ship, could get close to shore and ferry troops and supplies to the most devastated areas on land.

The magic of this is that an enormous amount of assistance can be provided while maintaining a small footprint on shore, greatly reducing the chances of a clash with the Burmese armed forces while nevertheless dealing a hard political blow to the junta. Concomitantly, drops can be made from directly overhead by the Air Force without the need to militarily occupy any Burmese airports.

In other words, militarily, it is feasible. The challenge is the politics, both internationally and inside Myanmar. Because one can never assume an operation will go smoothly, it is vital that the United States carry out such a mission only as part of a coalition including France, Australia and other Western powers. Of course, the approval of the United Nations Security Council would be best, but China—the junta's best friend—would likely veto it.

And yet China—along with

India, Thailand and, to a lesser extent, Singapore—has been put in a very uncomfortable diplomatic situation. China and India are invested in port enlargement and energy deals with Myanmar. Thailand's democratic government has moved closer to the junta for the sake of logging and other business ventures. Singapore, a city-state that must get along with everybody in the region, is suspected of acting as a banker for the Burmese generals. All these countries quietly resent the ineffectual moral absolutes with which the United States, a half a world away, approaches Myanmar. Nonetheless, the disaster represents an opportunity for Washington. By just threatening intervention, the United States puts pressure on Beijing, New Delhi and Bangkok to, in turn, pressure the Burmese generals to open their country to a full-fledged foreign relief effort. We could do a lot of good merely by holding out the possibility of an invasion.

The other challenge we face lies within Myanmar. Because a humanitarian invasion could ultimately lead to the regime's collapse, we would have to accept significant responsibility for the aftermath. And just as the collapse of the Berlin Wall was not supposed to lead to ethnic

cleansing in Yugoslavia, and the liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein was not supposed to lead to civil war, the fall of the junta would not be meant to lead to the collapse of the Burmese state. But it might.

About a third of Myanmar's forty-seven million people are ethnic minorities, who have a troubled historical relationship with the dominant group, the Burmans. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the heroine of the democracy movement, is an ethnic Burman just like the generals, and her supporters are largely focused on the Burman homeland. Meanwhile, the Chins, Kachins, Karennis, Karens, Shans and other hill tribes have been fighting against the government. The real issue in Myanmar, should the regime fall, would be less about forging democracy than a compromise between the Burmans and the other ethnic groups.

Of course, Myanmar is not the Balkans or Iraq, where ethnic and sectarian rivalries were smothered under a carapace of authoritarianism, only to erupt later on. Myanmar has suffered insurgencies for 60 years now, and may be ripe for a compromise under a civilian government. But neither can we be

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