

As Iraq Deteriorates, Iraqis Get More Blame

U.S. Officials,
Lawmakers Change Tone

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From troops on the ground to members of Congress, Americans increasingly blame the continuing violence and destruction in [Iraq](#) on the people most affected by it: the Iraqis.

Even Democrats who have criticized the Bush administration's conduct of the occupation say the people and government of Iraq are not doing enough to rebuild their society. The White House is putting pressure on the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and members of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group have debated how much to blame Iraqis for not performing civic duties.

This marks a shift in tone from earlier debate about the responsibility of the United States to restore order after the 2003 invasion, and it seemed to gain currency in October, when sectarian violence surged. Some see the talk of blame as the beginning of the end of U.S. involvement.

"It is the first manifestation of a 'Who lost Iraq?' argument that will likely rage for years to come," said Bruce Hoffman, a Georgetown University expert on terrorism who has worked as a U.S. government consultant in Iraq.

Americans and Iraqis are increasingly seeing the situation in different terms, said retired Army Col. Jeffrey D. McCausland, who recently returned from a visit to Iraq. "We're just talking past each other," he said, adding that Americans are psychologically edging toward the door that leads to disengagement. "We're arguing about 'cut and run' versus 'cut and jog.' "

Iraqis' role in their own suffering has been an issue since shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, when looters ransacked the national museum and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld dismissed it by saying, "Stuff happens." But more than three years later, with schools and hospitals struggling, electrical service faltering, and police and government agencies infiltrated by sectarian death squads, the question of blame is more urgent.

For example, a Nov. 15 meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee turned into a festival of bipartisan Iraqi-bashing.

"We should put the responsibility for Iraq's future squarely where it belongs -- on the Iraqis," began Sen. Carl M. Levin (D-Mich.), the committee's next chairman. "We cannot save the Iraqis from themselves." He has advocated announcing that U.S. troops are going to withdraw as a way of pressuring Iraqi politicians to find compromises.

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) followed by noting: "People in South Carolina come up to me in

increasing numbers and suggest that no matter what we do in Iraq, the Iraqis are incapable of solving their own problems through the political process and will resort to violence, and we need to get the hell out of there."

"We all want them to succeed," agreed Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.). "We all want them to be able to stabilize their country with the assistance that we've provided them." But, he added, "too often they seem unable or unwilling to do that."

Later the same day, members of the House Armed Services Committee took their turn. "If the Iraqis are determined and decide to destroy themselves and their country, I don't know how in the world we're going to stop them," said Rep. Robin Hayes (R-N.C.).

Iraqi Ambassador Samir Sumaidaie said he worries about the growing chorus of official voices blaming Iraq, and suggested that a little introspection on the U.S. side could help.

"I am indeed concerned about this trend," he said in an interview. "The U.S. through its actions and omissions has helped to create the current conditions in Iraq. Therefore the U.S. also bears responsibility in putting right the situation."

It isn't just politicians who have decided that the problem with Iraq is the Iraqis. In the military establishment, said Joseph J. Collins, a professor at the National Defense University, "there is lots of disappointment in the performance of Iraqi officials of all stripes."

Thomas Donnelly, a hawkish defense expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said he considers blame a legitimate issue. "Ultimately, just like success rests with the Iraqis, so does failure," he said. "We've made a lot of mistakes, but we've paid a huge price to give the Iraqis a chance at a decent future."

The blame game has also been playing out somewhat divisively within the secretive Iraq Study Group. The bipartisan commission, led by former secretary of state James A. Baker III and former congressman Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), is deliberating policy recommendations to put forward next month.

"I'm tired of nit-picking over how we should bully the Iraqis into becoming better citizens of their own country," former CIA Middle East expert Ray Close wrote in an e-mail to the other advisers to the study group.

Several other experts of various political stripes said this tendency to dump on Baghdad feels like a preamble to withdrawal.

"It's their fault, and by implication not ours, is clearly a theme that's in the air," said retired Army Col. Andrew J. Bacevich, a Vietnam veteran and longtime skeptic of the war in Iraq. It reminds him, he said, of the sour last days of the Vietnam War, when "there was a tendency to blame everything on the 'gooks' --

meaning our South Vietnamese allies who had disappointed us."

"People never understood the culture and the challenges that we faced in trying to build a new Iraq," a senior U.S. intelligence official said. "There's incredible frustration . . . but it also shows a great deal of ignorance."

"Definitely," said Paul Rieckhoff, who served in Iraq as an Army officer in 2003-2004 and went on to found a veterans group critical of the conduct of the war. "It is growing into an angry, scolding tone." He said he finds it "sad" -- "especially after all the talk of our mission to 'save the Iraqis.' "

The long-term effect of blaming Iraqis also could be poisonous, said Juan Cole, a University of Michigan specialist in Middle Eastern issues. He predicted that it will "infuriate the Iraqis and worsen further the future relationship of the two countries."

The turning point in the blame game seems to have occurred in early October, when both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.) went public with their frustrations, warning the Baghdad government that it must do much more much faster. Warner suggested that the United States should explore a "change of course" if security had not improved within 90 days.

During a surprise visit to Baghdad on Oct. 5, Rice said with uncharacteristic bluntness that the security situation was not helped by "political inaction."

The Bush administration hoped the long-delayed formation of a government, which took about five months after the Dec. 15 election last year, would produce more initiative by Baghdad. But the security and political situation continued to deteriorate, so the administration increased the pressure on Maliki's government. Over the past three months, U.S. officials and foreign diplomats said, senior U.S. military and administration officials visiting Baghdad have conveyed the same message: Get on with it.

"Our role is not to resolve those issues for them," Rice told reporters last month after pressing Maliki to be bolder about disbanding militias and reconciling sectarian differences. "They are going to have to resolve those issues among themselves."

Blaming Iraqis for the woeful situation disregards recent history, some experts argue. Phebe Marr, an Iraq expert and adviser to the Iraq Study Group, calculates that because of policy missteps and other errors, the United States bears about 60 percent of the blame. "You can't say, 'We did this and the Iraqis didn't rise to the occasion,' " she said. "There's enough blame to go around."

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