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A Psychologist's View On and From Iraq

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-----The following was authored by Dr. Kelly Anthony, Visiting Assistant Professor, Psychology Department, Wesleyan University. (Lightly edited by IBPP)

I personally joined the delegation, Academics for Peace, and the conference in Baghdad Jan. 11-17, as an expression of my personal opposition to a groundless war and to destructive and largely ineffective sanctions.

However, as a social psychologist, I saw the trip as an opportunity to observe first-hand how Iraqi citizens are holding up under profound chronic isolation, deprivation, and vilification.

I heard several senior academics literally beg us to help protect them and their children from war; I spoke with promising young people who had all but given up hope of a future, and I observed a rage so close to the surface that it was almost transparent as they shared their utter confusion and hopelessness regarding their situation. We are familiar with the devastation a traumatic event can have on someone's life, and the stress that inevitably follows. I think that what I saw wasn't so much post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as much as 'pre'-, or 'peri'-traumatic stress disorder. They are attempting to go on with their lives on a daily basis while constantly suppressing thoughts of inevitable mass destruction. Psychologists don't know exactly how much effect this kind of chronic stress and fear has on people's lives and futures, but we can guess it will be profound.

They do not see any compassion or justice right now in either their own government or ours. Yet they (even those on the streets) seemed stunningly able to draw distinctions between U.S. and U.N. policies that are slowly strangulating them versus the many people in the U.S. and the world who oppose this slow, and clearly psychological, torture. One emotion voiced most frequently was the utter confusion as they try, in vain, to understand what motives the current administration has for so clearly wanting to destroy them. As they search for answers, it is inevitable that they will arrive at some very unlikely political scenarios, such as that they are just the first country to fall in a US-led power grab of the entire Middle East- which I heard frequently.

If the most educated and well-off in Iraq are that frightened, bewildered, and depressed, how would we expect the uneducated masses to respond to this enormous humanitarian violation? What they (and we) are seeing as a direct result of this isolation is a recent and steep rise in the most radical and strictest Islamic practices that offers them a modicum of hope that the world has not. The sanctions seem to have been designed to hurt one person; in actuality, they are hurting everyone but Saddam Hussein, and have been doing so for 12 years.

IBPP Commentary. Readers might use the above text to help consider (1) the relevance of social psychology constructs for the 'real world' of international conflict, (2) cross-cultural reliability and validity issues in applying 'mainstream' social psychology from the United States to Iraq, (3) the relevance of social psychology for the education of political policymakers, and (4) the challenges of concurrently inhabiting an advocacy and a professional role.