

Children of Iraq

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On Thursday, Iraqis will go to the polls to elect the representatives who will serve them in the Iraqi National Assembly for the next four years. It's a much more crucial election than the one held in January. I was embedded with U.S. troops in Baghdad back then, and when I think back now, what I see in my mind's eye are the faces of many Iraqi children.

The first child I saw was on the side of Haifa Street, not far away from Baghdad International Airport. This little Iraqi son was holding his father's hand so tight that he looked "frozen." His father and the small crowd around them stared at us in the same way. The Humvee I rode in was blasting Bon Jovi's "Living on a Prayer" on big outside speakers - but no one seemed fond of listening to it. And the boy held tight to his father's hand until I lost sight of him.

I also have seen Iraqi kids who weren't frozen at all. The U.S. troops were like a magnet to every kid on every mahalle where we stopped. They practiced their English, made silly jokes and not only laughed, but made sure the troops laugh with them, too. And each time we parked, Charlie Team Capt. Tod Napier would have to put an end to it and try to get the kids to keep a distance. "We are open target here. If something happens, we don't want to take the kids with us," Capt. Napier explained.

Charlie Team took it very personally when 25 kids died on a day when they thought there would be a party to celebrate the opening of a new sewage pump. They prepared the party American-style, with lots of food and drinks, until two suicide cars struck. That sealed the deal for the troops to keep the kids at a distance.

Yet some Iraqi kids preferred the distance. Sometimes they caused trouble. On one stop, a group of 15- and 16-year-olds surrounded us. I saw one rolling his tongue around his lips and another insinuating a vulgar act. I started asking, "What is wrong with these kids?" Dr. Haifa Azawi, an Iraqi American, told me that they were trying to insult me. "They think of foreign women as liberated, as loose girls," she said. "I am sorry to say, but most think they are prostitutes." But, she says, when she has interacted with them, when she has hugged them, they turn back into kids looking to be loved and to feel secure.

"These are deprived children born under very difficult conditions," she said. They've lived through two wars - the war with Iran and the first Gulf war - then they were put under sanctions. They saw their mothers fighting malnutrition, they lived and heard their brothers and sisters die, either from the war or the sanctions. Now they live under occupation. They're growing up to be psychologically disturbed human beings, Dr. Azawi says, and most of them "will be tomorrow's terrorists." But they should not be.

In his speech last Wednesday, President Bush has acknowledged some mistakes in Iraq. He also said, "There are still kidnappings, and militias and armed gangs are exerting more influence than they should in a free society." These kids grow up deeply resenting the United States because of what they see their parents go through, and the things they hear from them. Surely, tons of candy have been distributed to the children of Iraq. But this "candy generation" doesn't seem to be turning their backs on their parents - tossing out sweets isn't the same thing as winning the hearts and minds of a generation. To help these kids and to make the election truly help build a democratic Iraq, security must be established.

Although American troops are accepted as "occupying forces," on Jan. 30 I also witnessed a father taking his two sons by the hand and bringing them to personally thank the troops. While his 6-year-old and 8-year-old shook hands with the soldiers, he kept his right hand on his heart and said "Shoukrn," which means "thank you" in Arabic. But then the first explosion hit close by. We rushed to the polling place. The children looked at the dead and injured bodies, but none cried. The area was cleared, but no one wanted to stop voting. Then an Iraqi mother came, her son and daughter in hand, to vote. Those kids looked around without understanding anything about what is happening.

Today should be the day to remember the Iraqi children and to promise that we will make sure they have a safe and peaceful future. What happens at the ballot box is not a question of who wins, but what kind of a future awaits these kids.

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