

In Iraq, Reality Can Trump Goodwill

by Lee Lawrence

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THE SUN BEAT DOWN HARD on a morning in June 2007 on the outskirts of Fallujah, where Iraqi civilians were gathering outside a schoolhouse. Minutes before eight, earth-colored humvees lumbered to a stop and disgorged US Marines in armored vests, Kevlar helmets and bullet-proof sunglasses. Behind them rolled white vans filled with Iraqi soldiers. When US Army units secured this corner of Al Anbar Province a few months earlier, they left behind a trail of collateral damage. Now that the area was calm, the Marine units, who had taken over from their Army peers, had invited Iraqis to present evidence of damage and receive compensation. They had also invited the Iraqi Army to provide security during this claims session.

But what began as a straightforward operation gradually devolved into a dance of equivocation and ambiguity. Rumor had it that a young woman with explosives strapped to her torso might pose as one of the claimants. So even before the Marines could begin to evaluate the claims, they had to figure out a way to search the women without offending them—or their husbands. The school's headmistress had agreed ahead of time to come and search the women. But when the Americans arrived, a queue of women stretched almost a block and there was no headmistress in sight. As the women sank against a wall and its sliver of shade, the Marines and Iraqi soldiers conferred. The Americans then retreated into the schoolyard while the Iraqi soldiers stepped toward the gathering crowd. A Marine stood guard at the gate, clutching a dog-leash. At the other end, a black Lab sat. Waiting. At the slightest whiff of explosives he would spring into action.

As each Iraqi woman stepped forward, an Iraqi soldier asked her to lift her burka and pat herself down. The theory was that even such a cursory check would reveal tell-tale lumps beneath her loose fitting tunic. In reality, the Iraqi soldier barely glanced at the women that he checked. If a suicide bomber had been hiding among them, would she have been discovered? And, if she had been discovered, would the tip-off have come from this cursory body search or would the dog at the gate alert them first? Some of the Marines figured the search was a waste of time, but that without it they were inviting trouble.

Once inside the gates, the female claimants filed to the right, the males to the left. Marines handed out bottles of water and ushered the women in batches inside the schoolhouse, to wait out of the sun. From a distance, these women loomed like a black cloud of robes and head veils. But a closer examination revealed differences. One woman sported a beaded border on her burka, another had tattoos on her face, a third held back her hair with a leopard-print scarf discernible beneath her black veil.

Inside the claims room, a few off duty Marines slumped at school desks behind a military lawyer, or JAG (for Judge Advocate General). They downed water while the Marines to the JAG's right remained busily at work. They had all taken off their helmets and sunglasses, revealing shaved heads and young faces. One by one, the claimants filed in, and the JAG motioned them toward a seat. Without a word, claimants handed him their statements and photographs, most in neat blue folders. The look in their eyes was alternately pleading, defiant, grateful, resigned.

The lawyer flipped through the pages, examining the statements and photographs, then passed the evidence to the Marines to his right. "When did this damage occur? Who did it?" the JAG asked. He listened, weighed the damage, and determined an amount while a Marine behind him peeled out dinar bills. "Put this away," the JAG told the claimant, "and don't tell anyone about it. The Marine will escort you out the back."

By the end of the first couple of hours, many of the answers started to sound eerily alike. Even the evidence started repeating itself. "This is the same room we saw earlier taken from another angle," one Marine said as he scanned a set of pictures a woman had brought in. He held up the photograph while another Marine rustled through earlier files. Sure enough, it was the same orange rug, the same overturned television, and the same tan bedspread and iron bedstead. As they discussed this, the woman sat with hands folded, eyes on the translator, waiting. "You haven't presented me with sufficient evidence," the JAG told her through the translator. Her eyes darted from the JAG to the translator and back to the JAG. She looked sullen. As she left the room, her burka billowed in the doorway, and the next claimant stepped into the room.

By the end of the day, the JAG figured he had probably recompensed some Iraqis for false claims and refused legitimate ones. Yet how could he really tell the difference? And who could blame the Iraqis for asking for money? Their livelihood and their lives had been shattered. Did they not deserve some compensation for that? Back at the camp that evening, the JAG debriefed the captain. Next time, they agreed, the US would settle claims through the local tribal chief. Let him figure out who had really suffered losses, they said. Let him find ways to keep the petitioners safe.



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