

Whom is John McCain trying to fool?

David Walsh
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The stroll through a Baghdad market conducted by John McCain, the Arizona senator and 2008 presidential hopeful, along with a number of other Republicans, was a stage-managed farce that will convince no one. McCain, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Reps. Rick Renzi of Arizona and Mike Pence of Indiana walked through the Shorja market Sunday and afterward praised the “progress” being made by the US military in Iraq.

At a news conference, where he was questioned by skeptical journalists, McCain claimed that “Things are better, and there are encouraging signs.”

Surreally, Rep. Pence went so far as to comment, “I candidly was not prepared to find a marketplace where thousands and thousands of Iraqis were moving about in regular everyday life like a normal outdoor market in Indiana in the summertime.”

Sen. Graham indicated that for him the Shorja visit was just another tourist adventure: “We went to the market and were warmly welcomed. I bought five rugs for five bucks.”

This farce has an element of derangement about it.

These are the conditions under which McCain and company took their little jaunt April 1: US soldiers entered the area before the American politicians, searched for explosives, sent informants among the people there, set up a perimeter and “secured” the neighborhood. Sharpshooters were deployed on rooftops.

The Republican delegation flew from the heavily-fortified Green Zone to a forward operating base in Baghdad, and then traveled by Humvee to the market. Once there, the politicians were accompanied by a “small army,” in the words of a *Newsweek* reporter, perhaps as many as 100 soldiers, while three Black Hawk helicopters and two Apache gunships patrolled the skies above.

Questioned after the stunt, local merchants ridiculed

the visit. The *Associated Press* quoted Jaafar Moussa Thamir, a 42-year-old who sells electrical appliances. “They were just making fun of us and paid this visit just for their own interests,” he said. “Do they think that when they come and speak few Arabic words in a very bad manner it will make us love them? This country and its society have been destroyed because of them and I hope that they realized that during this visit.”

Thamir said “about 150 US soldiers and 20 Humvees” accompanied the delegation. “I didn’t care about him, I even turned my eyes away. What were they trying to tell us? They are just pretenders.”

Karim Abdullah, a 37-year-old textile merchant, said the congressmen were kept under tight security and accompanied by dozens of troops. “They were laughing and talking to people as if there was nothing going on in this country or at least they were pretending that they were tourists and were visiting the city’s old market and buying souvenirs,” he said. “To achieve this, they sealed off the area, put themselves in flak jackets and walked in the middle of tens of armed American soldiers.”

Merchants whose comments were cited by the *New York Times* were “incredulous” that McCain drew the conclusion from his pathetic walk that the new security plan for Baghdad was working. Ali Jassim Faiyad, the owner of an electrical appliances shop in the Shorja market, commented to the newspaper’s reporter: “What are they talking about? The security procedures were abnormal!” He went on, “They paralyzed the market when they came. This was only for the media. This will not change anything.”

Abu Samer, a kitchenware and clothing wholesaler, told the *Times*: “He is just using this visit for publicity. He is just using it for himself. They’ll just take a photo of him at our market and they will just show it in the United States. He will win in America and we will have

nothing.”

A day after McCain’s visit, sniper fire rang out in the market, where 71 people were killed by a car bomb in February.

The death toll continues to mount in Iraq, contradicting the lies of the US government and military. A new Iraqi government tally indicated that violent deaths of Iraqi civilians nationwide had increased to 1,861 in March, up from 1,645 in February. The new security sweep began February 13. In total, 2,078 Iraqi civilians, policemen and soldiers were killed in March, 272 more than in February. Sixty-seven Iraqis officially were recorded as dying each day last month, up from 64 a day the month before.

An increase in violence and death distributed throughout various provincial cities and towns is the inevitable result of the higher security presence in the capital of Baghdad. The most deadly attack of the four-year war took place in Tal Afar last week, a double truck bombing which killed 152. Overall, the government claims that more than 600 Iraqis died over the course of the last seven days. Six US soldiers were killed over the weekend, and a seventh died from “noncombat causes.”

Some other recent incidents: only hours before McCain’s news conference, two senior Sunni politicians narrowly escaped assassination in Baghdad’s central Yarmuk district. Two unexploded suicide vests were discovered in the Green Zone. Last week a rocket attack killed two Americans in the enclave.

On Sunday, a British soldier was killed in Basra. Over the weekend, some 20 Iraqis were found dead, executed, mostly in Baghdad. A suicide truck bomber attacked an Iraqi army building in Mosul, killing two and injuring more than a dozen soldiers. Another bombing took place in Kirkuk Monday, which killed 15.

When pressed at his news conference, McCain, known for his short temper, abandoned his friendly tone and spoke like the foreign colonial conqueror that he aspires to be: “I study warfare. I am a student of history. If you control the capital city of a nation, you have a significant advantage.” He blamed the media for not giving the American people “the full picture.”

McCain also made the claim during his press conference that the Iraqis had demonstrated political

progress by committing themselves to revising the measures that prevent former members of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party from serving in the government. A day later, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the chief Shiite cleric in Iran, rejected the plan.

A Sistani aide said Monday that there was a “general feeling of rejection” over the proposal. The *Times* commented: “Ayatollah Sistani, who lives in the holy city of Najaf, generally does not issue proclamations himself, preferring to make his edicts known through his aides or other Iraqi officials. His word is considered sacrosanct not only among the Shiites in Iraq but also among those throughout the world, so his rejection of the draft law means it has virtually no chance of passage.” So much for that.

McCain’s media circus in the market and the absurd claims made at his press conference provide further proof of the filthy character of the US occupation. To the extent the Republican presidential hopeful and the others believe their own fantasies, it reveals the depth of disorientation of the American ruling elite.



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