

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Reality TV? ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Having spent a lot of the last year and a half in Iraq working variously for CNN, Fox and for the Coalition the question I most often get asked is "are things really like what we see on TV?" This is on my mind just now because the question came up, again, last night.

We were sitting at a combination bookstore, cyber-café and trendy bar just off Amman's First Circle, an old neighborhood of stone houses and striking views, the sort of place that exemplifies the modern society Jordan is becoming, and from which Iraq increasingly seems to be retreating. The questioner was a Fulbright scholar, an Arab-American newly arrived in Jordan for his year of study. But the question is not novel: I got it from left-wing activists when I spoke at a church in Vermont last July. I got it from solid Republican stalwarts from Colorado when I was on vacation in August.

The answer is that it is better, and it is worse. We have become so polarized in the United States these days that shades of gray do not register well with most Americans, but if there is anything that nearly two decades in the Middle East have taught me it is that gray is the region's predominant color.

Yes, Iraq is better than it often looks. The United States and its allies have done a lot to create the groundwork for local democracy at the village and town level, to get schools built and stocked with supplies and to get reconstruction projects both large and small started. The reason you do not hear about a lot of these things is not some huge left-wing media conspiracy, but the simple fact that much of it happens far from Baghdad in places that were hard for the international media to get to six months ago and are effectively impossible to reach today. Anyway, news is about conflict, and there is plenty of that in Baghdad to keep reporters busy (if they don't get killed or kidnapped).

But, no, Iraq is also worse than it looks precisely because all those reporters bottled up in the capital are so focused on the day-to-day carnage that in many cases the bigger picture is lost, and that bigger picture is that the failure by the US to restore security and the provision of basic services (power, water, sewage) renders moot much of the good the US has done. New schools mean little to people who do not feel safe getting their children to and from those schools. Local councils are a nice start, but power still resides in Baghdad and with the Americans and everyone knows it.

I should add that I know people – people who know a lot more about Iraq than I do – who would agree with everything I've just said, but still manage to draw relatively positive conclusions about the future. Not many people, I grant, but in fairness I figured I should let you know they are out there.

So is it Iraq better or worse than what you see on TV? Both. And moreso with each passing

day.
