



Photo by Sgt. Sean Kimmons

*An Iraqi Police officer (right) guards a polling site while hundreds of anxious voters wait outside in Kirkuk on Jan. 30.*

## Iraqis defy insurgency to vote

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KIRKUK, Iraq – It was about an hour before the polling site next to the Iraqi Police Highway Patrol station opened here, when a line of anxious Iraqi voters began to form outside on Jan. 30.

Hundreds of Iraqi men and women – equally in force – along with their children, stood in a growing line of determined Iraqis who have never voted in a democratic election in this country before.

Sporadic AK-47 gunfire and rockets launched by insurgents were heard by the crowd of Iraqis when the polling site opened at 7 a.m. Still, they were not intimidated and stayed in line.

These Iraqis demonstrated their desire to follow the road to a better future, and saw the Iraqi elections as a way to help pave that road.

“This is the first time [Iraqis] feel free,” said Mohamad Rasoul, an interpreter with Company B, Task Force 1-21 Infantry. “The true Iraq has started today and I am proud to be a part of it.”

Rasoul voted in the elections, along with many other Iraqis. After each Iraqi voted they dipped one of their fingers in ink. The ink made sure no Iraqi could vote more than once, but also in a way, the ink-stained fingers became a symbol of freedom.

Hassan Hussein walked almost 15 miles to a polling site to cast his ballot.

“It was a long way to walk, but it was worth it,” Hussein said through an interpreter. “I feel very good about today because it’s the first time that there’s going to be a real election in Iraq.”

Iraqi voters cast two separate ballots on Jan. 30. One was for a 275-member National Assembly and the other for Provincial leaders.

Sgt. Richard Allen, a team leader with Co. B, TF 1-21 Inf., witnessed the long lines of Iraqis who waited outside polling sites in the city and felt proud to play a part in their right to vote.

“I feel good about it. It will go down in history of how they got more freedom to do what they want and maybe it will lead on to how [Americans] have it now,” Allen said.

Iraqi Security Forces provided primary security around the polling sites,

while Allen and other Soldiers took up secondary security positions throughout the city. This was important, so the elections would be an Iraqi effort not run by Soldiers.

“It goes to legitimacy,” Maj. Daniel Hurlbut, S3 for 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, said about the Iraqi elections.

Even though Soldiers did not participate in the management of the elections or the direct security, it was still important for them to be out there to assist the ISF.

About 4,500 ISF personnel and 1,000 Soldiers, regardless of military occupational specialty, were dedicated to the security of this city on Election Day.

The Soldiers assisted ISF personnel to make sure 583,000 registered voters could vote at 217 polling sites in the Kirkuk Province.

## Iraq Election diaries from the field

### Days before the election

**28 Jan** - At 0300, while my team is on the rooftop of the police station, my gunner comments on how quiet it is. Seconds later an RPG impacts and explodes on a building near one of the election centers. The ING soldiers exchange small arms fire with AIF but my team is unable to get into the fight because there is a building blocking our line of sight. The firefight ends as quickly as it began, no injuries, no significant damage. 3rd Squad arrives at 1000 on the 29th to relieve my squad. — **Sgt. Levi B. DURAN**, 31B20 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, 272<sup>nd</sup> Military Police Company, 720<sup>th</sup> Military Police Battalion, 42<sup>nd</sup> Military Police Brigade

**29 Jan** - Bab Al Sheik - Part of the power grid in eastern Baghdad is down for most of the night and early morning. No vehicles and no power make the city almost silent. The only sounds are dogs barking and an Iraqi policeman coughing at a roadblock down the street. **DURAN**

**29 Jan** - On the last day before elections I try to spark up conversation with as many local nationals as I can. Overall they all seemed enthusiastic about their "great day" as one man called it. In a country where having a cellular phone or camera is a "great freedom" voting is a source of a lot of excitement. I know that of course, that all of Iraq doesn't share these few people's thoughts. Maybe, a lot of Iraqis are sick of all the fighting, the explosions, and the death and destruction that daily life here consists of. Maybe voting is their chance to take some control of the violence.

The gravity of this operation occurred to me while I was chatting with a local national who works for the new government. He overflowed with optimism about Iraq's future and the eventual defeat of the insurgency. Blood, sweat and tears or otherwise, friendly or enemy was ultimately shed in the struggle to hold elections or block them. **Sgt. Steve S. MEDEIROS**, 31B2O 3rd Squad, 1st Platoon, 272nd Military Police Company, 720th Military Police Battalion, 42nd Military Police Brigade.

**29 Jan** - None of the internees were speaking of the election but were playing their games like football, volleyball, as normal.

At 2100 the internees went into their tents as if there was a curfew implemented. Only five internees were out and about which left an eerie taste in my mouth. At 0115 we received 30 new new detainees from Abu Ghraib. Our shift ended at around sunrise. **Spc. C.M. Walton**, 105th MP BN HHC Camp Bucca, Iraq.

**Day of Election** - At approx. 0630, 3 mortars impact in a parking lot/bus station across the street about 300 meters away. Iraqi police are dispatched to search a nearby cemetery for AIF who may have fired from there. The city seems totally different with only military and police traffic on the streets. Election center officials arrive early but there are already a lot of people walking to the election centers. ING and the IP set up search

## IRAQ Continued from Page 25

ment of election ballots to designated polling sites in the city.

"We just provided security and monitored the activity," said Sgt. Ivan A. Hernandez, a team leader with Co. B, TF 1-21 Inf. "We were secondary security, Iraqi Army was primary. We just over watched what they were doing and they did a good job."

Hernandez and his three-vehicle convoy secured the outer perimeter, while Independent Electoral Commission, Iraq (IECI) and Iraqi Army personnel delivered about 11,000 ballots to four polling sites on Jan. 28.



Photo by Sgt. Sean Kimmons

*A Kurdish boy celebrates Iraq's elections by waving a Kurdistan flag to on-coming cars in Kirkuk.*

points to screen all voters. There are a few large explosions that rattle the station even though they are far away. Apache helicopters circle the city all day. Iraqi policemen come up to us to proudly show off their black fingertips showing that they voted. There are a total of 5 election centers under Bab Al Sheik responsibility and all 5 centers report excellent voter turnout.

Everything in our sector was amazingly calm and quiet for Election Day. The polls closed at 1800 and the streets immediately emptied because of the curfew. It's a quiet night; the power is still out in most parts of eastern Baghdad. **DURAN**

A pretty nasty firefight breaks out and the ING officers bellow out some orders, a minute of utter chaos ensues, then they load up and are off to fight. The drivers of their pick-up trucks are already hitting the gas before all of their passengers' limbs are in the vehicle. They are mostly young seemingly optimistic Iraqis. They are quick to fight and to defend each other. It is nice to see them roll out with an Iraqi flag flapping in the wind.

The quiet of morning is shattered by prayer call and then explosions in all directions. Radio traffic is non-stop and reports of small arms fire, RPG and grenade attacks trickle in.

There have been suicide attacks but not nearly the number that I had expected. There are reports of large voter turnouts in my AO. Sporadic gunfights and explosions continue throughout the day, but this is Baghdad and that isn't unusual.

Our medic treats a civilian with a nasty gunshot wound to his arm. The man expresses his gratitude as best he can with broken English and hand signs, and smiles. He is taken to a hospital.

The day drags on, much quieter than I would have expected. About 20 children play in the street with a soccer ball given to them by a passing patrol. In 10 months I don't recall ever having seen children play on this street (it's closed to some MNF). They use the C-wire blocking the road as boundaries and a makeshift goal.

"I think it's cool, because we're part of history," Hernandez said about playing a role in the Iraqi elections. "Twenty-five years from now, I can look back and tell my grandchildren, 'what you read about in those textbooks, I was there. I experienced it personally.'"

There were a total of 131 polling sites in the city. Soldiers from Co. B, 65<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion emplaced force protection at 110 of those sites. To ensure security was tight on Election Day, TF 1-21 Inf. was augmented an additional 423 Soldiers to bring the task force up to more than 1,000.

"[We] also had 1,540 Iraqi Army and 2,947 Iraqi Police operating in the city for a combined total of 5,500 personnel," Brown said.

All of that hard work and planning was worth it, as the outcome from the Kirkuk elections was better than expected, Brown said.

"It appeared to be [a high voter] turnout. There were long lines at all of the [polling] sites.

"It was definitely a historic event. It all came together with all the different agencies involved," Brown said.