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Three Years Too Late

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While the Washington press corps chased the nine wise men (and one wise woman) of the Iraq Study Group as they scampered from the White House to Capitol Hill to press conferences to a multitude of talk show appearances in their efforts to pull Dubya's chestnuts from the Iraq fire, some journalists seem to have missed some of its most important findings.

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One of the more alarming was that, of the 1,000 employees of the massive new US Embassy inside the Green Zone bubble in Baghdad, there are - wait for it - SIX who are fluent in Arabic.

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In a very real sense, that pitiful number could be a metaphor for one of the most serious flaws in the entire Iraq adventure. We invaded a country about which we knew virtually nothing. Not only didn't we know the Arabic language, we knew nothing about Iraq's religious sects, tribes, culture, sensitivities, customs, traditions, mores, or the Byzantine interrelationships among all these attributes.

And that predicament is not limited to the State Department, which runs the new embassy. It is also true of the armed services, the CIA, and all the many other parts of our national security apparatus.

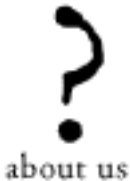
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This critical deficiency raises serious questions about the practicality of the Iraq Study Group's recommendation that a greatly increased number of US military trainers be embedded into the Iraqi Security Forces, down to the company level. Is anybody wondering how you go about training a soldier you can't speak to? Or how you understand quickly enough when one of your Iraqi comrades decides he cares

more about his tribe than about his country and makes you "the enemy?"



The shortage of Arabic speakers was one of the red flags the State Department sent to Donald Rumsfeld before the invasion. But the outgoing SecDef wasn't about to listen to any advice from State - or most anyone else. And even if incoming DOD chief Bob Gates is prepared to heed that kind of counsel, it may be too late for it to make any difference. Producing Arabic speakers takes years, and the US doesn't have years. Like most of the challenges the US now faces in Iraq, there is no quick fix for this one either.



There is only so much translation we can expect from Arabic-speaker General John Abizaid!

Given the importance of the Middle East to US national security interests long before the Iraq invasion, how is it that one of the world's most multicultural countries is unable to deliver men and women fluent in Arabic?

Some of the reasons are easily explained, others are much more complicated.

Among the simple ones: American education has long neglected foreign language study, and American students have for years shown little appetite for learning them; Arabic is a particularly difficult language to learn; some applicants simply don't want to serve in Iraq; and there are strong indications of the unwillingness of many Arab and Muslim-Americans to apply to agencies they see as having contributed to the "Islamophobic" environment that pervades our country today.

Moreover, while the number of college-level Arabic language students has increased substantially since the attacks of 9/11, many drop out - and even those who complete their courses will not come anywhere near qualifying as fluent.

President Bush appears to have understood the importance of the issue; in 2005, he ordered Porter Goss, then the director of the CIA, to increase the number of Arabic-speakers by 50 percent. The CIA - and the FBI, the DOD, and the Department of Homeland Security - all failed to meet that goal. What they did achieve was an exponential increase in job applications from Arabic-speakers.

That was largely the result of a recruiting binge by the national security agencies. For example, they offered generous sign-on

bonuses of up to \$25,000 for new hires fluent in Arabic and other crucial languages. They participated in college job fairs. The CIA placed ads in local newspapers in communities where there is a heavy concentration of Arab-Americans. One featured a photo of the Statue of Liberty with the words: "For over 100 years, Arab-Americans have served the nation. Today we need you more than ever."

Last year's intelligence reorganization law also authorized the agency to study so-called "heritage communities" such as metropolitan Detroit's Arab populations, with foreign language abilities. It also earmarked money for a pilot program to recruit foreign-language speakers into a civilian linguist reserve corps.

All these activities resulted in US national security agencies reporting substantial increases in employment applications. But the ratio of applications to job offers remains low.

One result, according to the Heritage Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, is that analysts at the CIA, the FBI, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency are "awash in untranslated gleanings of intelligence" in Arabic. The Foundation also said there are not enough interpreters to handle detainees in Iraq.

The FBI says that since 9/11, the agency has processed 30,000 applicants for jobs as linguists in Arabic, Farsi, and other tongues. But it points out that "out of 20 applicants, we'd be lucky to get one or two."

So what has happened to these applicants? Many have been rejected after - or before - their first interview. Many more have been waiting years for their security clearances. Among these job-seekers, it should be no surprise that by the time those clearances arrive, the applicants have already found other jobs.

But the key constraint appears to be that Arab and Muslim Americans are frequently rejected for security clearances on the preposterous basis that they have contacts in the Middle East - like friends and families. Recruiters are particularly hesitant to approve people in this group of applicants; no one wants to be the guy who approves the next "sleeping Osama."

The shortage is no less acute at the State Department. A bipartisan State Department advisory panel on public diplomacy headed by Edward Djerejian, a former ambassador to Israel and Syria, found that only 54 of 279 Arabic speakers employed by State were fluent. Of those, only six were fluent enough to appear on Arabic television

programs.

The Baker-Hamilton group made 79 recommendations to the president about how to craft a new strategy for our involvement in Iraq. These have been treated with both praise and scorn. But the issue may in fact be moot.

Like the group's exhortation to increase the number of Arabic-speakers in our Baghdad embassy, its recommendations are unlikely to produce a "victory" in Iraq. We needed the ISG three years ago - when there still might have been a few good options. Now there are none.

William Fisher has managed economic development programs in the Middle East and in many other parts of the world for the US State Department and USAID for the past thirty years. He began his work life as a journalist for newspapers and for the Associated Press in Florida. Go to [The World According to Bill Fisher](#) for more.

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