

Iraq poll says Diggers have negative effect

Patrick Walters, National security editor

MOST Iraqis believe the presence of Australian troops in Iraq since 2003 has had an overall negative effect on the country.

According to a new poll, only Kurds in northern Iraq and the tiny Christian minority agree the presence of the Diggers in their country has been clearly positive.

The negative trend extended from Baghdad south to Dhi Qar and al-Muthanna provinces, where the bulk of Australia's ground forces have been based.

Overall, 30 per cent of respondents in Kurdish regions were positive about the Australians, compared with only 5 per cent who were negative about the Diggers' presence.

The poll questions were commissioned by Crosby-Textor and were part of a larger poll conducted by the firm's London partner a month ago.

The poll of 4000 Iraqis showed 27 per cent believed Australia's military presence had had a negative effect, compared with 12 per cent who felt the Diggers had been a positive influence.

In Baghdad, 31 per cent were negative about Australia's troop presence compared with 13 per cent who were positive.

Australia has had a small but visible troop presence in Baghdad since 2003, with a 100-strong security detachment equipped with light-armoured fighting vehicles guarding the Australian embassy and protecting VIPs.

For the past three years an Australian task group has been based in southern Iraq, firstly near Samawah Al Muthanna province in southern Iraq, and more recently at Tallil in Dhi Qar province.

In Al Muthanna, 36 per cent of those polled were negative about Australia compared with 18 per cent who were positive. In Dhi Qar province it was 9 per cent positive and 22 per cent negative.

The poll revealed a large level of ignorance among Iraqis about Australia's military involvement. Slightly more than half of all respondents, apart from Christians, answered "don't know" to the key question as to whether Australian forces had had a positive or negative effect.

Compared with the overwhelming US military presence across the country and the strong British presence in Basra, the Australian troops have been largely invisible to Iraqis except in central Baghdad and two key southern provincial towns.

Australia will withdraw its 550-strong battle group from southern Iraq by July, leaving about 300 Australian military in the country, including the security detachment in Baghdad.

The most negative response on Australia's presence came from the troubled Al Anbar province which had a significant al-Qa'ida presence until early last year. Al Anbar was overrun by Australia's special forces at the start of the 2003 war. Of the Al Anbar respondents, only 2 per cent were positive compared with 46 per cent who were negative. In the southern city of Basra, the figures were 2 per cent positive against 24 per cent negative and 68 per cent who said they did not know.

Asked if Australian troops should play a bigger, smaller or same-sized role in the future, 20 per cent of Iraqis wanted a bigger role against 23 per cent for a smaller role and 19 per cent who opted for no change.

In Dhi Qar province, where the Australian battle group is based, the figures were 18, 20 and 44 per cent respectively.