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"Lessons Learned from America's Experiences in Iraq"

Policy analysts agree that Iraq is in the midst of a full-fledged civil war; whether the United States-led coalition stays for a short, intermediate or long time, or reconfigures its force composition from armed forces to civil society builders, this result is still inevitable. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger conceded this point earlier this week, when he told the BBC that the coalition and other interested parties must set more realistic goals, even if that means the eventual breakup of Iraq. The goals of democracy, negotiations, compromise, and pluralism simply cannot come to fruition in an environment of lawlessness and retribution. The civil war in Iraq is like an uncontrollable forest fire, fanned by domestic tinder and foreign winds. Until the tinder burns and the winds stop, the civil war will not burn itself out.

Assessing the extent of the problems in Iraq, the directors of the United States intelligence agencies testified before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in mid-November. CIA Director General Michael V. Hayden noted that "even if the [Iraqi] central government gains broader support from Iraq's communities, implementing the needed reforms to improve the life of all Iraqis will be extremely difficult. Iraq's endemic violence is eating away at the state's ability to govern. Security forces are plagued by sectarianism." At the same hearing, the Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, General Michael D. Maples, asserted that "violence in Iraq continues to increase in scope, complexity, and lethality."

With British and U.S. forces policing sectarian groups, private militias, criminal gangs, anarchists, angry former Ba'athists, Hussein loyalists, and foreign recruits, it is no surprise that these soldiers who are not trained in police work are unable to stop the rampant killings, murders, robberies, and, most recently, kidnappings of government bureaucrats from inside a ministry.

It is therefore a useless exercise to keep dreaming that there is a military or diplomatic solution to the Iraqi mess.

If the fire is going to burn regardless of the number of firemen on the scene, then the coalition should step back and let it burn. On the horizon there lurks no Iraqi autocrat with means to quell the civil war. For the

most part, with the exception of a couple of states training Iraqi police and military forces, the Arab states neighboring Iraq have been bystanders. They watch Iraq burn and rip itself to shreds with violence. They sit (presumably in anticipation of the fire turning to smoldering embers) and consider how they will divide up Iraq's resources and territory (they could do this directly or indirectly through their clients and proxies). The Arab media is replete with antagonism against the coalition fighting to save Iraq's integrity, and yet they suggest no commitment to have their own young men enforce law and order? why couldn't the Arab states have formed a 150,000 expeditionary peace-keeping force for Iraq? Perhaps Arab leaders know that ridding Iraq of its indigenous violent sectarianism is hopeless?

Many more blunders than noted here were made by the United States prior to overthrowing Saddam: not understanding the sectarian political culture that Saddam held together with brutal authoritarian force; not understanding the mediocre quality of Iraq's public infrastructure; self-indulgently believing that Jeffersonian or French Revolutionary principles would work in Iraq; relying on shaky intelligence that led to a futile hunt for weapons of mass destruction; and, of course, asserting a connection between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 terrorists. Beyond these oft-discussed missteps, what are some lessons can we take away from the American experience in Iraq?

"If you break it, you own it."

Colin Powell had it right when he issued this warning in the summer of 2002. This is a lesson that already resonates in Iraq, and it is one that will signal caution to future generations of American voters and policymakers contemplating a military invasion.

The more allies, the better.

Before engaging in a regional fight, a nation must be sure to have local coalition partners who will join the fight and help clean up the unanticipated consequences/mess that inevitably ensue when upsetting the status quo. At the greater international level, broad multi-lateral efforts have historically been the preferred approach, as in Iraq in 1991 and in the handling of nuclear issues in Iran and North Korea.

An unconventional enemy requires an unconventional military strategy.

Insurgencies, be they in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, or even in

Lebanon (Hizballah) must be fought by strengthening the local government so that its agencies are capable of enforcing the will of the state.

Military superiority does not spell victory.

In failed and fragmenting states, where indigenous sectarianism prevails, disenfranchised masses overwhelm, Islam serves as a platform for violent mobilization, and money can be accessed easily, military might is useless. The United States should have learned this lesson from Israel.

Battling insurgencies just takes longer.

Industrial democracies have not yet adjusted their timetables to reflect the reality of fighting insurgencies; unlike most nation-states, whose clocks are calibrated in days, months, and years, insurgents mark time in decades and generations. Insurgents in various conflicts have successfully exploited this difference.

Dialogue is a strategy, not a concession.

In these pages last summer, I advocated that the United States engage in a dialogue with Syria and Iran. Now, six months later, the United States may just have this in mind.

That foreign policy lessons are important to American voters has been highlighted by the failure of Jimmy Carter's Presidential reelection campaign and well as this year's mid-term elections, in which George W. Bush's Republican Party lost control of the House and the Senate. Just before the latter election, I stood in front of a supermarket in West Hartford, Connecticut, handing out campaign literature, and people confided their intense, passionate, and uncompromising feelings about the American presence in Iraq. The results in the days that followed confirmed one over-arching lesson sent by American voters: Washington should not run from engagement in Middle Eastern issues, but if it does, recent history and political culture must guide its actions.

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