

Tackling Terror in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

After the bombings of the U.N. headquarters and Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, U.S. Army Gen. John Abizaid commented that terrorism was becoming the "No. 1 security threat in Iraq."

In truth, terrorism was the greatest threat from the moment coalition forces set out to liberate Iraq.

This was the plan in Damascus, Tehran and al-Qaida's Afghan caves from the beginning, but it will fail.

Contingency planning by U.S. military strategists prepared to deal with a laundry list of potential catastrophes that never materialized, from saboteurs rupturing major dams to reprisal attacks by the long-suppressed Shiite majority against their Sunni-Baathist tormentors.

Coalition forces were unprepared, however, for some of the challenges they did face, such as rampant looting and antiquated electricity grids.

U.S. planners also fell short in considering the likely development of post-battle Iraq as a nest of low-intensity conflict and the exponential effect popular dissatisfaction would have on grass-roots support for attacks on coalition forces. Terrorists are drawn to loosely governed states with no or little central authority like ants to a picnic.

From the outset, planners should have known that both anti-coalition terrorists and anti-liberation spoilers would see postwar reconstruction Iraq as an especially inviting operating environment. Counterterrorism officials predicted just this even before troops set foot on Iraqi soil. As one official noted, "An American invasion of Iraq is already being used as a recruitment tool by al-Qaida and other groups."

Seeds of a pluralistic society in Iraq are now being uprooted -- even as coalition forces try to plant them -- by swarms of radicals from across the Muslim world who enter Iraq, primarily from Syria and Iran but also from Saudi Arabia, to take advantage of Iraq's newfound status as a failing state. Like Afghanistan, Somalia, parts of Yemen, Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Chechnya and other ungoverned territories, Iraq has become a magnet drawing Baathists, Sunni terrorists, Shiite radicals and others opposed to the development of a peaceful, pluralistic society in Iraq.

Almost as soon as coalition forces crossed into Iraq, reports leaked out of thousands of Arab irregular forces -- some volunteers, some members of terrorist groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Fatah splinter groups -- crossing the Syrian border into Iraq to battle coalition forces.

Coalition commanders commonly referred to these irregulars as "Syrians" because most of them were Syrian. And most who weren't carried Syrian travel documents, in some cases specifically marked, "Reason for entry: Jihad. Length of stay: Indefinite." In one case, U.S. military forces captured a large group of Syrians and confiscated 70 suicide jackets -- each filled with 22 pounds of military grade C-4 explosives, and mercury detonators.

Soldiers found several hundred thousand dollars on a bus that came from Syria, together with leaflets implying Iraqis who killed Americans would be rewarded. Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa explained his country's facilitating terrorists' travel to Iraq by asserting quite plainly, "Syria's interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq."

In case some planners were still unclear on the developing trend, Osama bin Laden issued a recorded message to the "mujahedeen brothers in Iraq" in February stressing "the importance of the martyrdom operations against the enemy."

Most recently, Sunni clerics meeting in Stockholm last month at a conference of the European Council for Fatwa and Research approved the use of suicide attacks in Iraq (and in the Palestinian territories and Kashmir).

Iraq, however, is unlikely to become the next Afghanistan. Talking heads are easily excitable and quick to despair at the slightest setback. Their doomsday reactions to the U.N. headquarters bombing are reminiscent of their similarly despairing reactions to the sandstorms and convoy attacks that briefly interrupted an otherwise brilliant march on Baghdad.

In fact, coalition forces can contain the not-so-sudden terrorist threat with a combination of increased protection of high-profile targets, aggressive border surveillance and patrols, vigorous and creative intelligence operations and fast-striking special operations.

Emphasizing unconventional tactics over overwhelming force will produce counterterrorism successes. Coalition forces can accomplish this mission at their current levels, but far more civilian experts are needed to fast-track the provision of basic services to an Iraqi population that is primarily concerned with rapid economic recovery.

With smart planning, a combination of reconstruction and counterterrorism efforts can neutralize the terrorist threat that, from the outset, posed the greatest danger to both coalition forces and the goal of creating a better Iraq. ❖

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