

Understanding the Iraqi Insurgency

Op-ed

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This week Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, facing concerns expressed by U.S. servicemen that they lacked sufficient armored vehicles to deal with the insurgency in Iraq, responded by saying that no intelligence before the war had given the impression that there would be the degree of insurgency that the U.S. faces today.

In deference to Secretary Rumsfeld, this is absolutely true. No intelligence appraisal would have assumed that the 400,000 members of Iraq's military, instead of being selectively purged and reassigned to security duties under the supervision of U.S. officers, would be summarily fired, their salaries and pensions withdrawn. No intelligence assessment would assume that in a socialist country like Iraq, where nearly half the work force depended on government jobs, the overthrow of that government would be followed by the billions of dollars of U.S. reconstruction aid being overwhelmingly allotted to a small number of mega-infrastructure projects carried out by U.S. contracting firms, rather than being allotted to thousands of smaller projects benefiting Iraqi contractors and providing Iraqi jobs. And of course, no intelligence forecast could assume that the U.S. would round up thousands of Iraqis in sweeps for intelligence, hold many in secret, deny them elementary judicial process, and in complete disregard of the Geneva conventions and past U.S. military practice, torture and humiliate hundreds of Iraqis in a manner sufficiently public and photographed that horrific images of U.S. conduct toward ordinary Iraqis would circulate around the globe.

It is time to admit that the insurgency in Iraq has reached its current magnitude in large measure because of actions taken by the U.S. after the fall of Baghdad. The insurgency is being fueled by U.S. actions that have angered, humiliated, and frustrated people not only in Iraq but throughout the Muslim world. While bringing democracy to the Middle East is a noble and desirable outcome, you cannot bring democracy to people while humiliating them – human dignity is the bedrock of individual liberty and freedom. If the U.S. does not change course, it has no hope of defeating this insurgency; instead, if it persists in the same mindset that has prevailed since the liberation of Iraq, it risks making the insurgency still worse.

The lack of coherence that has characterized U.S. operations in Iraq from the beginning of the liberation continues apace. Without knowing the true identity of the insurgents, we identify “targets” whose destruction, we believe, will weaken the insurgency. Yet securing ‘targets’ cannot win a war against mobile guerillas. We have destroyed Fallujah, rendering many thousands of ordinary Iraqis homeless. As a result, we have pushed the active insurgents into Mosul, a larger and more important city where they are creating even greater havoc, while creating in Fallujah a resentful pool of thousands of potential recruits to insurgency who will return to gutted homes and ruined businesses with neither water nor electricity.

Our longer-term strategy for suppressing the insurgency is similarly muddled. The heart of that strategy is to compensate for a deficiency in the number of U.S. troops by training Iraqi security forces. Yet no one seems to have pointed out the insoluble chicken-and-egg problem here – we lack troops to fight the insurgency, so we will train Iraqis to do so. But because we lack troops to fight the insurgency, we cannot provide

adequate security for Iraqi training. While thousands of brave (and economically desperate) Iraqis have signed up to join the new Iraqi security forces, they have been decimated by insurgents who treat assemblies of applicants, training facilities for new recruits, and U.S.-appointed local officials or Iraqi commanders as so many welcome targets of opportunity for insurgent attacks. If we cannot even protect those enrolled in training for the Iraqi security forces, how can we hope to produce enough Iraqi security forces to protect the broader Iraqi population? Nonetheless, the U.S. has refused offers from allies to take recruits for Iraqi security out of the country for training abroad.

While U.S. officials assume that the lure of 'democracy' will eventually transform insurgents into voters, how can we be sure that our understanding of democracy is being communicated to ordinary people in Iraq? The pictures from Abu Ghraib hardly convey U.S. respect for the rule of law and minority rights as essentials of democratic process. If 'democracy' means the right of those in power to hold and humiliate those not in power in a bare-knuckles form of majority rule, why should any Sunnis in Iraq welcome elections that will almost certainly mean a Shia majority-ruled state? What are the lessons in rule of law and minority rights that U.S. actions have been teaching in liberated Iraq?

U.S. servicemen will eventually get better armor and vehicles. What is uncertain is whether they can ever succeed with leadership that fails to understand or admit how its own actions have inflamed the very insurgency that threatens our troops.