

BLOWBACK REVISITED

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Summary: The current war in Iraq will generate a ferocious blowback of its own, which - as a recent classified CIA assessment predicts -- could be longer and more powerful than that from Afghanistan. Foreign volunteers fighting U.S. troops in Iraq today will find new targets around the world after the war ends.

TODAY'S INSURGENTS IN IRAQ ARE TOMORROW'S TERRORISTS

When the United States started sending guns and money to the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s, it had a clearly defined Cold War purpose: helping expel the Soviet army, which had invaded Afghanistan in 1979. And so it made sense that once the Afghan jihad forced a Soviet withdrawal a decade later, Washington would lose interest in the rebels. For the international mujahideen drawn to the Afghan conflict, however, the fight was just beginning. They opened new fronts in the name of global jihad and became the spearhead of Islamist terrorism. The seriousness of the blowback became clear to the United States with the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center: all of the attack's participants either had served in Afghanistan or were linked to a Brooklyn-based fund-raising organ for the Afghan jihad that was later revealed to be al Qaeda's de facto U.S. headquarters. The blowback, evident in other countries as well, continued to increase in intensity throughout the rest of the decade, culminating on September 11, 2001.

The current war in Iraq will generate a ferocious blowback of its own, which – as a recent classified CIA assessment predicts – could be longer and more powerful than that from Afghanistan. Foreign volunteers fighting U.S. troops in Iraq today will find new targets around the world after the war ends. Yet the Bush administration, consumed with managing countless crises in Iraq, has devoted little time to preparing for such long-term consequences. Lieutenant General James Conway, the director of operations on the Joint Staff, admitted as much when he said in June that blowback "is a concern, but there's not much we can do about it at this point in time." Judging from the experience of Afghanistan, such thinking is both mistaken and dangerously complacent.

COMING HOME TO ROOST

The foreign volunteers in Afghanistan saw the Soviet defeat as a victory for Islam against a superpower that had invaded a Muslim country. Estimates of the number of foreign fighters who fought in Afghanistan begin in the low thousands; some spent years in combat, while others came only for what amounted to a jihad vacation. The jihadists gained legitimacy and prestige from their triumph both within the militant community and among ordinary Muslims, as well as the confidence to carry their jihad to other countries where they believed Muslims required assistance. When veterans of the guerrilla campaign returned home with their experience, ideology, and weapons, they destabilized once-tranquil countries and inflamed already unstable ones.

Algeria had seen relatively little terrorism for decades, but returning mujahideen founded the Armed Islamic Group (known by its French initials, GIA). GIA murdered thousands of Algerian civilians during the 1990s as it attempted to depose the government and replace it with an Islamist regime, a goal inspired by the mujahideen's success in Afghanistan. The GIA campaign of violence became especially pronounced after the Algerian army mounted a coup in 1992 to preempt an election that Islamists were poised to win.

In Egypt, after the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 prompted a government crackdown, hundreds of extremists left the country to train and fight in Afghanistan. Those militants came back from the war against the Soviets to lead a terror campaign that killed more than a thousand people between 1990 and 1997. Closely tied to these militants was the Egyptian cleric Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, "the Blind Sheikh," whose preaching, according to the 9/11 Commission, had inspired Sadat's assassins. Abdel Rahman's career demonstrates the internationalization of Islamist extremism after Afghanistan. The cleric visited Pakistan to lend his support to the Afghan jihad and encouraged two of his sons to fight in the war. He also provided spiritual direction for the Egyptian terrorist organization Jamaat al-Islamiyya and supported its renewed attacks on the Egyptian government in the 1990s. He arrived in the United States in 1990 – at the time, the country was regarded as a sympathetic environment for Islamist militants – where he began to encourage attacks on New York City landmarks. Convicted in 1995 in connection with the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Abdel Rahman is serving a life sentence in the United States. But his influence has continued to be felt: a 1997 attack at an archaeological site near the Egyptian city of Luxor that left 58 tourists dead and almost crippled Egypt's vital tourism industry was an effort by Jamaat al-Islamiyya to force his release.

The best-known alumnus of the Afghan jihad is Osama bin Laden, under whose leadership the "Afghan Arabs" prosecuted their war beyond the Middle East into the United States, Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia. After the Soviet defeat, bin Laden established a presence in Sudan to build up his fledgling al Qaeda organization. Around the same time, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops arrived in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. military presence in "the land of the two holy places" became al Qaeda's core grievance, and the United States became bin Laden's primary target. Al Qaeda bombed two U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, nearly sank the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen in 2000, and attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. Bin Laden expanded his reach into Southeast Asia with the assistance of other terrorists who had fought in Afghanistan, such as Riduan Isamuddin, known as Hambali, who is the central link between al Qaeda and the Indonesian terror group Jemaah Islamiyah, and Ali Gufron, known as Mukhlas, a leading planner of the 2002 Bali bombing that killed more than 200 people.

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

The Afghan experience was important for the foreign "holy warriors" for several reasons. First, they gained battlefield experience. Second, they rubbed shoulders with like-minded

militants from around the Muslim world, creating a truly global network. Third, as the Soviet war wound down, they established a myriad of new jihadist organizations, from al Qaeda to the Algerian GIA to the Filipino group Abu Sayyaf.

However, despite their grandiose rhetoric, the few thousand foreigners who fought in Afghanistan had only a negligible impact on the outcome of that war. Bin Laden's Afghan Arabs began fighting the Soviet army only in 1986, six years after the Soviet invasion. It was the Afghans, drawing on the wealth of their American and Saudi sponsors, who defeated the Soviet Union. By contrast, foreign volunteers are key players in Iraq, far more potent than the Afghan Arabs ever were.

Several factors could make blowback from the Iraq war even more dangerous than the fallout from Afghanistan. Foreign fighters started to arrive in Iraq even before Saddam's regime fell. They have conducted most of the suicide bombings – including some that have delivered strategic successes such as the withdrawal of the UN and most international aid organizations – and the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, another alumnus of the Afghan war, is perhaps the most effective insurgent commander in the field. Fighters in Iraq are more battle hardened than the Afghan Arabs, who fought demoralized Soviet army conscripts. They are testing themselves against arguably the best army in history, acquiring skills in their battles against coalition forces that will be far more useful for future terrorist operations than those their counterparts learned during the 1980s. Mastering how to make improvised explosive devices or how to conduct suicide operations is more relevant to urban terrorism than the conventional guerrilla tactics used against the Red Army. U.S. military commanders say that techniques perfected in Iraq have been adopted by militants in Afghanistan.

Finally, foreign involvement in the Iraqi conflict will likely lead some Iraqi nationals to become international terrorists. The Afghans were glad to have Arab money but were culturally, religiously, and psychologically removed from the Afghan Arabs; they neither joined al Qaeda nor identified with the Arabs' radical theology. Iraqis, however, are closer culturally to the foreigners fighting in Iraq, and many will volunteer to continue other jihads even after U.S. troops depart.

IN BAGHDAD AND IN BOSTON

President George W. Bush and others have suggested that it is better for the United States to fight the terrorists in Baghdad than in Boston. It is a comforting notion, but it is wrong on two counts. First, it posits a finite number of terrorists who can be lured to one place and killed. But the Iraq war has expanded the terrorists' ranks: the year 2003 saw the highest incidence of significant terrorist attacks in two decades, and then, in 2004, astonishingly, that number tripled. (Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously complained in October 2003 that "we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror." An exponentially rising number of terrorist attacks is one metric that seems relevant.) Second, the Bush administration has not addressed the question of what the foreign fighters will do when the war in Iraq ends. It would be naive

to expect them to return to civilian life in their home countries. More likely, they will become the new shock troops of the international jihadist movement.

For these reasons, U.S. allies in Europe and the Middle East, as well as the United States itself, are vulnerable to blowback. Disturbingly, some European governments are already seeing some of their citizens and resident aliens answer the call to fight in Iraq. In February, the Los Angeles Times reported that U.S. troops in Iraq had detained three French militants -- and that police in Paris had arrested ten associates who were planning to join them. In June, authorities in Spain arrested 16 men, mostly Moroccans, on charges of recruiting suicide bombers for Iraq. In September, prosecutors in the United States indicted a Dutch resident, Iraqi-born Wesam al-Delaema, for conspiring to bomb U.S. convoys in Fallujah. These incidents presage danger not only for European countries, but also for the United States, since European nationals benefit from the Visa Waiver Program, which affords them relatively easy access to the United States.

But it is Saudi Arabia that will bear the brunt of the blowback. Several studies attest to the significant role Saudi nationals have played in the conflict. Of the 154 Arab fighters killed in Iraq between September 2004 and March 2005, 61 percent were from Saudi Arabia. Another report concluded that of the 235 suicide bombers named on Web sites since mid-2004 as having perpetrated attacks in Iraq, more than 50 percent were Saudi nationals. Today, the Saudi government is exporting its jihadist problem instead of dealing with it, just as the Egyptians did during the Afghan war.

A SWITCH IN TIME

American success in Iraq would deny today's jihadists the symbolic victory that they seek. But with that outcome so uncertain, U.S. policymakers must focus on dealing with the jihadists in Iraq now -- by limiting the numbers entering the fight and breaking the mechanism that would otherwise generate blowback after the war.

The foreign jihadists in Iraq need to be separated from the local insurgents through the political process. Success in that mission will require Iraq's Sunni Arabs to remain consistently engaged in the political process. Shiite and Kurdish leaders will have to back down from their efforts to create semiautonomous states in the north and the south. But the prospects for these developments appear dim at the moment, and reaching a durable agreement may increasingly be beyond U.S. influence.

To raise the odds of success, the United States must deliver more security to central Iraq. This means securing Iraq's borders, especially with Syria, to block the flow of foreign fighters into the country. The repeated U.S. military operations in western Iraq since May have shown that at present there are insufficient forces to disrupt insurgent supply lines running along the Euphrates River to the Syrian border. Accomplishing this objective would require either more U.S. troops or a much larger force of well-trained Iraqi troops. For the moment, neither of those options seems viable, and so additional U.S. soldiers should be rotated out of Iraq's cities and into the western deserts and border towns, transitioning the control of certain urban areas to the Iraqi military and police.

Foreign governments must also silence calls to jihad and deny radicals sanctuary once this war ends. After the Soviet defeat, jihadists too often found refuge in places as varied as Brooklyn and Khartoum, where radical clerics offered religious justifications for continuing jihad. To date, some governments have not taken the necessary steps to clamp down on the new generation of jihadists. Although the Saudis largely silenced their radical clerics following the terrorist attacks in Riyadh in May 2003, 26 clerics were still permitted late in 2004 to call for jihad against U.S. troops in Iraq. The United States must press the Saudi government to end these appeals and restrict its nationals from entering Iraq. In the long run, measures against radical preaching are in Riyadh's best interest, too, since the blowback from Iraq is likely to be as painful for Saudi Arabia as the blowback from Afghanistan was for Egypt and Algeria during the 1990s.

Finally, the U.S. intelligence community, in conjunction with foreign intelligence services, should work on creating a database that identifies and tracks foreign fighters, their known associates, and their spiritual mentors. If such a database had been created during the Afghan war, the United States would have been far better prepared for al Qaeda's subsequent terror campaign.

President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, once asked of the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?" Today, the Bush administration is implicitly arguing a similar point: that the establishment of a democratic Iraqi state is a project of overriding importance for the United States and the world, which in due course will eclipse memories of the insurgency. But such a viewpoint minimizes the fact that the war in Iraq is already breeding a new generation of terrorists. The lesson of the decade of terror that followed the Afghan war was that underestimating the importance of blowback has severe consequences. Repeating the mistake in regard to Iraq could lead to even deadlier outcomes.