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Iraq the Model?

How Applying Lessons from our Successes and Failures in Iraq Can Shape a Winning Strategy in Afghanistan

Lydia Khalil

“This was a reckless intervention and no one has ever succeeded in occupying this land.” “We are sacrificing young lives in the name of an unachievable mission.” “This conflict has no end in sight.” No, this is not the prevailing mood on Afghanistan. These were comments bandied about just a couple of years ago when the United States was faced with the same uncertainty about how to move forward in Iraq. The tone in 2006-2007 was much the same as it is now, as the United States is again facing an unpopular war with questionable ties to its national interests.

The U.S.’s experiences in Iraq should not be ignored as the Obama administration considers what is to be done in Afghanistan and attempts to answer the same questions– “Do we stay the course?” “Do we reinforce our efforts?” Or “do we scale back our objectives?”

Before critics can cry that Iraq and Afghanistan are too different to draw comparisons, let us acknowledge the differences. Afghanistan is a largely rural, tribal culture with low levels of development. Iraq is more urban, has more resources, a history of highly centralized government and relatively high levels of development. Both countries have their own histories with outside powers.

Context matters, but these differences do not take away from the fact that there are broad lessons that can be applied that go beyond the specifics of each nation and the precise circumstances of international involvement with them.

Explaining the National Interest

Critics of the war have challenged the Obama administration to prove that Afghanistan is not only worth a reinforced commitment, but the current presence of international, particularly U.S. troops, in the first instance. Those, like Boston University professor Andrew Bacevich, have asked why Afghanistan, “an impoverished, landlocked country producing nothing Americans want or need qualifies as a vital U.S. national security interest.”

As Iraq deteriorated, the war’s opponents and proponents alike all claimed the country was never vital to U.S. national interest, as many do now in Afghanistan. Weapons of mass destruction

were never found, Saddam did not support al Qaeda terrorists and for all intents and purposes the Ba'ath regime was contained.

However, once the United States became deeply entrenched in Iraq, these arguments did not hold much traction. Washington's perceived interests in going in became very different from its interests in coming out. Washington's interests mutated in Iraq from protecting against the use and spread of weapons of mass destruction to clamping the tourniquet on regionally destabilizing civil conflict and battling a complex insurgency with ties to al Qaeda, two things that threatened its national interests.

Likewise, the United States' interests have mutated in Afghanistan from denying al Qaeda a safe haven from which to conduct attacks against the West, to, again, the need to defeat a complex insurgency for the sake of regional stability. In Afghanistan's case, however, weapons of mass destruction are indeed a concern. The Afghan and Pakistani insurgent forces have cross-pollinated to destabilize a nuclear Pakistan and Afghanistan is fast becoming a battle for influence between Pakistan and its nuclear rival India. The outcome in Afghanistan will also affect Washington's standing vis a vis its regional and international rival, Iran.

The stubbornness of the Bush administration was critical to turning the situation around in Iraq and pushing back criticism that it was the very presence of the U.S. military that contributed to the insecurity and jeopardizing the U.S.'s global interests. The same stubbornness needs to be applied in Afghanistan but a better job must be done of explaining why it is worth supporting a reinforced commitment in Afghanistan.

Washington must also convincingly articulate how Afghanistan is vital to U.S. national interest, while also fully explaining how these interests have inevitably changed over the course of a conflict. But first it must convince itself of this fact. The Obama administration still has not come to a consensus on what its goals, let alone, strategy should be in Afghanistan.

But those who argue that the Taliban will not revert back to supporting al Qaeda and is therefore not a national security threat to the United States and the rest of the world are dead wrong. Al Qaeda has comeingled and influenced both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to such a degree that al Qaeda's interests will surely be represented in any Taliban government. The only possible endpoint in Afghanistan that will bode a good outcome for the United States is when the country remains stable enough to disallow the return of the Taliban to power and the resurrection of Afghanistan as a state sponsor of terror.

Institution Building Not Partnering

Engendering faith in the institutions of a new government is the single most important thing that can be done to enforce stability and the only lasting solution to an ongoing insurgency.

Institution building is a time consuming task and one that United States and its international partners have tried to avoid once they have set about destroying the dysfunctional institutions that did exist.

Equating it with imposing alien forms of government and quixotic efforts to transform "primitive" societies, nation building has caught a bad rap. It simply took too long and did not

deliver the required result. Nation building was often confused with occupation. As General Abizaid succinctly put it regarding Iraq, "We must in all things be modest. We are an antibody in their culture."

Reconstruction efforts have, instead, tended to focus on sniffing out partners not rebuilding institutions. In Iraq a 25 member "Governing Council" was appointed under UN auspices to act as partners in rebuilding the Iraqi government, in order to transfer the responsibility of nation building, avoid the appearance of occupation and remove the stigma of the international military presence.

A gradual plan that had institution building and the fostering of grass roots political parties at its core, (Ambassador L. Paul Bremer's "Seven Steps") was chucked in favor of transferring power to an appointed body and quick elections that led to an illegitimate constitution negotiated in smoke filled rooms with a handful of interlocutors instead of the input of the citizenry.

And who were these "partners?" They were often exiles, opportunists, or those who exaggerated their ability to deliver in order to gain access and funding but who had little legitimacy with the rest of the population. They spoke our language and understood the culture and bureaucracies of Washington and the U.N. A Washington insider like Ahmed Chalabi was much easier to deal with than a local village elder who had no idea what CERP funding is.

But relationships with these partners often backfired and reflected badly on Washington and the international community because they were seen as legitimizing the abuses or ineptness by their very partnership. This drove a wedge of mistrust between international aid officials and the local population.

A lot of energy was spent in endless negotiations and backdoor deals with "partners" when the real partners- average citizens who needed services and wanted to see their country rebuilt- became more suspicious of the reconstruction effort. Many citizens became disillusioned, turned to the insurgency or at very least did not participate in the rebuilding of their own country.

Average citizens just didn't understand why the international community was dealing with individuals who were not representative of their interests and who often worked against institution building that could benefit the whole country in order to bolster their power through patronage networks.

Dubious partnerships give the insurgents a ready argument – that all this talk of rebuilding and restoring stability is a sham. The real aim of the international presence is to install a regime they can easily manipulate to look out for their own interests at the expense of the indigenous people.

Though the unease and resentment towards the presence of foreign troops is hard to ignore, missing in the "foreign presence as antibody" argument is an acknowledgement of the simultaneous desire of the indigenous population for the international community to help them rebuild their societies. Polling conducted in Iraq consistently demonstrated an ambivalent and paradoxical view towards foreign troops. A majority would always support their withdrawal, but in the same breath would say "maybe not yet."

In Afghanistan the United States is accused of propping up the increasingly unpopular and corrupt Karzai government not helping build the state's capability. Before that, Washington was in cahoots with the warlords, believing that even though they were unsavory, they needed to be kept inside the tent.

This was misguided and the flawed elections in Afghanistan could be a blessing in disguise. This is a chance to disconnect from a discredited partner - the Karzai government - and promote good governance instead of linking the entire reconstruction effort to a particular cohort.

Though the international aid effort cannot bolster its own credibility with the Afghan people at the expense of the Afghan government, it must focus on institutions not personalities. Military and civilian efforts should be associated with building schools, promoting the rule of law, working to train bureaucrats in procedures, not propping up a particular government.

The key is to focus on process not outcomes and to enforce institutional foundations not governments, with a particular focus on anti-corruption efforts. As General McChrystal highlighted in his report, progress is hindered by not only a resilient insurgency but also by a crisis of confidence in the Afghan government and both of these issues can only be addressed through institution building.

Policy options that call for a reduced commitment to institution building, and even thought experiments on redrawing national borders are not viable.

One such thought experiment masquerading as a foreign policy solution to the Iraq conflict came from America's current vice president. In a 2006 op-ed, then Senator Biden, equating Iraq to Bosnia, suggested dividing Iraq into three Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish federal regions. Never mind that the majority of Iraq's provinces were ethnically mixed and this effort would require wholesale population redistribution. And never mind that would have inflamed the insurgency further (remember, much of the Iraqi insurgency was driven by the belief that the United States wished to weaken and break up the Iraqi state through federalism,) Senator Biden believed that "unity through division" was the answer.

Vice President Biden is giving similarly bad advice regarding Afghanistan. Instead of supporting the advice of the top military commander in Afghanistan he is instead advocating that the U.S. scale back our troop presence, forget about counterinsurgency and instead focus on killing al Qaeda operatives in the region. But killing terrorist leaders is a game of "whack a mole." When one goes down, another one pops up in his place.

Baitullah Mehsud, the feared commander of Tariq e Taliban who was responsible for such attacks as the assassination of Benazir Bhutto was killed earlier this year by a drone strike. He was as effective a militant commander as they come, yet his death did not impact the tempo of terrorist and insurgent activity. If anything, the insurgency has maintained a steady clip. This proves that the only means to rid the region of al Qaeda influence defeat the Taliban led insurgency and stabilize Afghanistan is by addressing the underlying conditions that allows the insurgency to thrive in the first place.

Disband the Police ... in a Way

Most people believe that disbanding the Iraqi army was one of the single worst decisions of the post war reconstruction effort. However there were some long-term benefits of that decision that haven't been acknowledged. While it may have turned former military officers into recruits for the insurgency, it also got rid of one of the most feared institutions of the Baathist Iraqi state. The army under Saddam was used as a tool of internal repression but after Coalition efforts to disband and rebuild it, the Iraqi army became one of the most respected institutions of national unity in the country.

The problem lay with the police forces. Too big to disband and beyond corrupt, the Iraqi police, and its "special units" participated in some of the worst atrocities during the height of the sectarian conflict. If it were possible, the same should have been done to the Iraqi police forces.

Disbanding the Afghan police force and starting from scratch would be similarly unrealistic, but doing things like retraining and renaming the police force, and changing uniforms or insignia would send a message that the international effort is committed to building a better and fairer police force that is on the side of the Afghan people.

More recruits need to be brought in and provided with rule of law training, and paid a decent wage. The better-trained and more respected army should be brought in to participate in policing activity. Strict firing practices for those who are suspected of being involved in corrupt activities – petty or otherwise – would send a strong message to the population that the international community is on their side as Afghanistan builds up its police force.

The Real Lesson of the Surge

More troops were absolutely necessary in Iraq but their mere presence was not what defeated the Iraqi insurgency. In a way the Iraqi insurgents defeated themselves and they did this by deciding it would better serve their interests if they stopped cooperating with al Qaeda and started cooperating with the U.S. military. In doing so they could gain control of their own country, rid Iraq of unwanted foreign extremist influence and finally get the U.S. packing.

Counterinsurgency tactics must convince the indigenous Afghan insurgents to do the same. To be sure, the situation is much more complicated in Afghanistan. Unlike Iraqi insurgents who wanted to regain political power within the current Iraqi state, Pashtu insurgents are present on both sides of the Durand Line and are instead interested in creating an alternative form of governance – a "Pashtunistan" or Islamic Emirate.

But in order to get this insurgency under control, the military effort must find a way to wedge between the various components of the Afghan insurgency and play them off one another as was done in Iraq. The Taliban is a flimsy alliance of local commanders. They are not a monolithic group with central leadership. And this must be exploited.¹

¹ See Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban: "Diametrically Opposed"? Vahid Brown, *Foreign Policy* at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/22/al_qa_ida_and_the_afghan_taliban_diametrically_opposed

Exploiting disagreements, and separating indigenous from foreign elements, and co-opting the indigenous groups will weaken the insurgency and give greater legitimacy to governance structures.

In order to do this, both more troops, and a nuanced understanding of the Afghan and Pakistani insurgent groups, are necessary. One must accompany the other and one is insufficient without the other.

The bulk of the additional troops will have to come from the United States. The continental infatuation with President Obama has not led the Europeans to increase their troop presence in Afghanistan or loosen their force protection measures so that they can do more than defend their fortified bases and actually patrol their AORs.

The lack of international consultation in the prosecution of the Iraq War did a great deal to damage our international credibility. But our decision to “go it alone” allowed Washington the freedom, for better or worse, to execute the war as it willed. The time and energy devoted to negotiating, coordinating and cajoling NATO - which is considerable - could be better spent focusing on how the U.S. military, working with committed partners, could better carry out its mission.

Trying to defeat an insurgency with targeted strikes and Special Forces raids alone as some have advocated is like trying to catch a whale with a fishing rod instead of a harpoon. If Special Forces alone could have done it then one would think that General McChrystal, a former Special Operations Commander, would have been the first to advocate this strategy.

In Iraq, Washington fooled itself into believing that it could secure the country and our objectives there with a small force and in a short time frame. Years of painful and expensive experience in Iraq have cured that delusion but have also allowed the U.S. military to develop a counterinsurgency strategy that works. It is a counterinsurgency strategy that focuses on human security and institution building – and troops needed reinforce the revamped strategy. The same would apply in Afghanistan.

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