SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Counterterrorism and Military Occupation

Bernard I. Finel

Introduction

The American presence in Afghanistan is sustained by a very straight-forward rationale. We were, after all, attacked on 9/11 by al Qaeda which at the time was operating with impunity under the protection of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Given that history, allowing the Taliban to reestablish itself in Afghanistan seems self-evidently unacceptable. After all, history suggests a direct linkage between Taliban control of Afghanistan and the most devastating terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

But, as with many seemingly straight-forward rationales, the logic of the argument dissipates under more careful scrutiny. While the lesson of 9/11 suggests that giving terrorist groups a safe haven is a recipe for disaster, the lesson of the military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001 demonstrates the inability of occupying forces to stamp out the kinds of networks that can support attacks on the scale of 9/11 or much worse.

The essay will make four interrelated points. First, the attacks of 9/11 though spectacular in consequence, were simple in execution. Second, the IED networks that have proliferated in Afghanistan and Iraq are orders of magnitude more complex than the portion of al Qaeda that planned and executed the 9/11 attacks. Third, there is no conceivable tactical or strategic approach to military occupation that could plausibly eradicate groups capable of attacks as unsophisticated as those of 9/11. Fourth, as a consequence, of all the possible rationales for a continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan, the counterterrorism argument is demonstrably the weakest.

The Unrecognized Simplicity of 9/11

The hardest part of pulling off the 9/11 attacks was simply imagining the plot. Our misunderstanding of 9/11 is due to two elements. The first is our over-emphasis on the issue of pilot training. The second is the sheer spectacle of the attacks themselves, captured live on television.

The decision to send several of the 9/11 attackers to flight school was arguably an unnecessary risk taken by the operation. Technical documents online combined with a few hours playing with something like Microsoft's Flight Simulator would have been more than enough to give the pilots the skills they needed to pull off the attacks. Hobbyists around the world build virtually perfect replicas of airline cockpits in their homes. In the case of the 9/11 "pilots," all they had to

do was turn off the transponders and fly by visual recognition. Seizing control of the planes was made possible by the element of surprise, a policy decision that pilots should not resist hostile takeovers, and the willingness of a small group of thugs to use knives and boxcutters on unarmed civilians.

The operation required minimal intelligence gathering. The participants did not need sophisticated forged travel documents – their major effort was in acquiring new copies of passports that did not contain incriminating travel to suspect countries.[1] It was a stunningly simple, wildly audacious operation that just happened to come off almost perfectly. Because the results were so extraordinary, we implicitly assume the plot must have had a high-level of technical sophistication. But it simply didn't.

9/11 was nineteen thugs with stabbing implements, four of whom had the sort of rudimentary flight training that could be acquired by playing a computer game, backed by a simple strategic planning and financing cell that only required a few individuals and a relatively small amount of money. True, the nineteen were chosen, in part, by recruiting a hand-picked group from a larger pool of jihadist recruits. But in the end, finding nineteen individuals with the right combination of fanaticism and psychopathology is not as hard as we might wish it were.

The Unrecognized Sophistication of the IED Threat

In contrast to our tendency to overestimate the sophistication of the 9/11 plot, we tend to underestimate the implication of the IED campaign against American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. In part, the problem is the seeming simplicity of the attack. Intuitively, rigging an old artillery shell to explode seems easier than bringing down the World Trade Center. But in this case, our intuition is wrong.

According the new U.S. Army Counter-Insurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24), there have been over 80,000 IED attacks on U.S. forces since 2001. These attacks have resulted over 1,700 U.S. fatalities in Iraq and over 200 in Afghanistan.[2] [3] The sheer number is a hint at the size of the challenge. Obviously, some of the networks are responsible for dozens if not hundreds of attacks. But while each network may be relatively small, in the aggregate we are talking about easily thousands of participants in these attacks.

But the size of the network only provides a small hint at the sophistication of the threat. Rigging an IED to explode is not tremendously difficult, but it is more complex that flying an airplane into a building. Furthermore, because of American counter-measures, the challenge of detonating devices has become increasingly complex. The sheer variety of IEDs and the inventiveness of their creators is staggering. Their evolution over time is even more frightening,

[1] The National Commission on Terrorism, "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States,"August 31, 1994, 235.
2 Brookings Institute. "Iraq Index." Brookings Saban Center for Middle East Policy.http://www.brookings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx (accessed February 27, 2009).
[3] Brookings Institute. "Afghanistan Index." Brookings Saban Center for Middle East Policy.http://www.brookings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx (accessed February 27, 2009).

requiring what amounts to a sophisticated ability to share intelligence and best practices across relatively large theaters while under military occupation.

Logistically, planting IEDs is also much more complex. While detonating old artillery shells is relatively simple, the supply of those is becoming limited. As a result, IED networks have had to become proficient in the production of homemade explosives. And while, one might expect relatively good results from a rudimentarily trained pilot, poorly trained explosive experts have a tendency to blow themselves up. The production of homemade explosives includes building (and keeping hidden) a primitive laboratory, acquiring and storing precursor chemicals, and producing, storing, and ultimately distributing finished explosives. The explosives then have to be bundled with detonators capable to surviving increasingly sophisticated counter-IED measures and then implanted in appropriate sites for detonation. Literally every stage of that process is more complex than the 9/11 attacks, and the combination of them required to launch even one attack, much less than 80,000, demonstrates that IED networks in Iraq and Afghanistan are several orders of magnitude larger and more sophisticated than the 9/11 cell.

Indeed, our countermeasures demonstrate the gap in sophistication. We've spent over $15 billion in counter-IED measures since 2001, whereas the single most effective measure in preventing 9/11-style attacks was a measure to reinforce cockpit doors on airliners that cost a total of approximately $250 million.[4] That 60-1 ratio of spending for counter-IED vs. counter-9/11 defensive measures is a good indicator of how much more complex the IED threat is.

Military Occupation Cannot Achieve Counterterrorism Objectives

The terrifying part of the IED threat is that it is not externally sponsored from some sort of safe haven (although Iran has apparently provided some assistance to IED networks in Iraq) but rather is largely a function of insurgent networks that arose following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq while those countries remained under U.S. military occupation.

The sheer vastness and complexity of the IED industry have made it possible to pursue approaches that target the networks themselves, and seek to disrupt attacks before they occur rather than mitigate the consequences afterwards. These "left of the boom" – on a timeline -- efforts have had a great deal of success.[5] But these are also efforts that rely on the fact that IED networks are tremendously complex and persistent – mostly launching repeated operations within a relatively confined geographical space.

The lesson of our "left of the boom" efforts is that we do have some ability to control insurgent-style networks with appropriate intelligence gathering and assessment. But these counter-IED approaches also suggest how fundamentally difficult it would be to generalize these successes to smaller, better compartmentalized groups aiming to launch a single attack.

---

4 The counter-IED costs include funding for the DoD's Joing Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization as well as investments in *Mine Resistant Ambush Protected* (*MRAP*) vehicles. This figure likely underestimates the true costs dramatically since it ignores the cost of retrofitting older vehicles with heavier armor.

5 Rick Atkinson, "Left of Boom: The Struggle to Defeat Roadside Bombs," Washington Post, A11, September 30, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/specials/leftofboom/index.html (accessed February 27, 2009)

In short, our ability to penetrate IED networks does not suggest a similar capacity to penetrate terrorist plots. As a consequence, we need to acknowledge that there is virtually no compelling evidence that military occupation of Afghanistan provides any significant protection against terrorist plots, even those arising from Afghanistan itself.

Regime change and military occupation can control the development of conventional military capabilities and of WMD programs that require a large physical plant to implement (notably nuclear programs). However, these sorts of interventions have minimal counterterrorism benefits because terrorist attacks rarely require state-level support to be effective.

Counterterrorism, as a consequence, is not a compelling justification for remaining in Afghanistan.

Conclusions

Questioning the counterterrorism value of remaining in Afghanistan does not, of course, provide any definitive policy recommendations about U.S. policy towards what has become known as the "Af-Pak" problem. But removing the counterterrorism rationale does tremendously complicate the debate. At present our discussions about Afghanistan and Pakistan often meander through wide-ranging discussions about stability of Pakistan, human rights in Afghanistan, control of the drug trade, and other significant issues. In the end, however, the debate tends to resolve itself on the issue of 9/11. The policy consensus on Afghanistan –that we must remain because a return to the status quo ante is intolerable – is fundamentally a claim about the counterterrorism mission. A better debate on Afghanistan will become possible once we stop assuming that our presence there will prevent a handful of determined and ruthless men from committing an act of mass-murder in an American city. It won't, and the assumption that it will may provide us a false sense of security at home and inspire an overreaching commitment abroad.

Dr. Bernard I. Finel is a Senior Fellow at the American Security Project (ASP) where he directs research on counterterrorism and defense policy He is the lead author of ASP's annual report, "Are We Winning? Measuring Progress in the Struggle against Violent Jihadism." Prior to joining ASP, Dr. Finel was a professor of military strategy and operations at the U.S. National War College.

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. Support SWJ here.