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# **Can the United States Iraq-ify the problem: Consider the Soviet Lessons in Afghanistan**

**by**

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*Are there distinct parallels between the US-Iraq situation and the experience of the former Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan? If so, before we defy history should not some relevant lessons be considered by US leaders as they grapple with a withdrawal strategy to Iraq?*

After six years of conflict with religious-inspired resistance, Soviet public support for Afghanistan waned, military leaders grew weary and cynical, and Afghan resistance increased in strength and willpower. Currently, public pressures for an Iraqi withdrawal are rising and if not carefully managed could result in a similar outcome like the Soviet efforts to “afghan-ize” the Afghan conflict. As US politics push to “Iraq-ify” the problem, leadership should note past withdrawals from counterinsurgencies to ensure a US withdrawal does not set preconditions for an Iraqi collapse and US failure. This paper analyzes Soviet-Afghan withdrawal negotiations and recommends that the US implement an internationally-monitored, regional “compromise and enforcement” negotiations strategy because any publicly announced timetable without provisos to modify or reverse the withdrawal will only accelerate the withdrawal itself and likely lead to civil war in Iraq and result in long term repercussions for US foreign policy.

## **I. Lessons in a Soviet Exit Strategy**

In 1978, Soviet-backed Afghan military officers seized the Kabul government and announced broad programs that redistributed land, provided greater freedom for women, and initiated other progressive reforms. However, these reforms “ran counter to the traditional Afghan culture that reflected tribal customs and resulted in the Mujahideen under a declaration

of jihad to defend the faith.”<sup>1</sup> In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded, seized control, and introduced a new president. Over the next seven years, the Soviets fought the Mujahideen, which were supported by the United States through Pakistan. In 1989, the Soviets officially departed Afghanistan, leaving an unstable government in Kabul and conditions ripe for civil war. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, ending further aid and support to the pro-Soviet Afghan government. The Soviet collapse worsened a civil war that escalated to the point of ethnic cleansing. Eventually, the Taliban controlled enough territory to provide a safe haven for al Qaeda.

### **Diplomatic**

Three years after the Soviet intervention in 1979, the Soviets demonstrated the foresight to commence with diplomatic negotiations for an exit strategy in the Afghan crisis. In 1982, with United Nations mediation, the primary actors – Pakistan, Afghanistan, Soviet Union, and US - settled on four points. First, the resolution demanded a politically independent and non-aligned Afghanistan. Second, the Soviets would withdraw all foreign combat troops. Third, Afghanistan would govern with the right of self determination and no outside interference. Lastly, the actors would set conditions for the return of over five million refugees, “in safety and honor.”<sup>2</sup> The Soviets and US saw these points as vital for conflict resolution and the regional balance of power. Unfortunately, the debate over a Soviet withdrawal timetable turned negotiations away from political solutions towards military ones that resulted in intensified violence throughout Afghanistan and ultimately a Soviet defeat.

Three key lessons emerge from the failure of the Soviet-Afghan negotiations process. First, the negotiations disallowed participation of key resistance groups, deepening alienation among the Afghan population and increasing violence throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> Second, secret

Soviet-US negotiations permitted ongoing aid to Kabul and the Mujahideen, respectively. Such proxy aid set preconditions for civil war between the Mujahideen versus an immature, unstable Kabul government. Third, when Gorbachev announced in 1988 that the Soviet withdrawal would be complete within nine months and not be linked to stability of the Afghan government, he was attempting to mollify unfavorable Soviet public opinion toward the government because of an unpopular war. Conversely, the pronouncement of a timetable ultimately *undermined the international legitimacy of the negotiations*.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this publicly announced timetable, a newly empowered Mujahideen seized key terrain for positional advantage and leverage upon the Soviet withdrawal which began to unravel the balance of power, worsened the refugee crisis and internally displaced persons crisis, and set conditions for civil war.

### **Informational**

Negative international perception and eroding public support pressured the Soviets to initiate negotiations in 1982, leading to a precipitous, publicly announced withdrawal timetable. In response to the timetable, the Soviets planned to influence perceptions by opening up press coverage of their withdrawal. This plan, which included press from the United States and Great Britain, represented a giant leap forward for the Soviets in a crucial period.<sup>5</sup> Soviet media strategy called for embedded press to demonstrate Soviet power and its benevolence in ending conflict. Unfortunately, the increased Mujahideen violence that resulted from the announced public withdrawal prevented the Soviets from embedding the press safely with the troops.

Soviet leaders feared that press coverage would lead to a perception of defeat and validate public pessimism. Consequently, the Soviets settled for a press conference in Kabul followed by photo opportunities at key border crossing sites. Soviet efforts to use information could have achieved a desired effect domestically and internationally if the withdrawal strategy

had possessed preconditions that all parties must adhere to as a condition for a withdrawal.

However, the timetable lacked such provisos and sapped the international media of its power to pressure the Mujahideen, Pakistan, US, and the Soviets to adhere to the withdrawal agreement.

### **Military**

Diplomatic negotiations failed to balance military operational ways and means with political ends to ensure long term stability of the Kabul government. Initially, the negotiations in 1982 permitted the Soviet military to balance ends, ways and means with respect to time and enemy actions. However, the public announcement of a nine-month withdrawal timetable became the military end and precluded any further effort by the Soviet military to achieve any realistic objectives for future stability. Consequently, the Soviet military found itself planning, organizing, and executing an accelerated withdrawal without flexibility and unable to meet key termination criteria developed in the negotiations.

Soviet military leaders assumed tremendous risk because they were driven by the timetable as they attempted to set conditions for Afghan-led operations. Although the accord permitted a Soviet advisory capability, it did not maintain adequate combat capability or a stay behind force for deterrence or rapid response. Second, the accord did not account for the difficulty and time needed in reshuffling the Afghan forces to protect key infrastructure, prevent tribal warfare, and secure key areas from the Mujahideen as the Soviets withdrew. As a result, the Mujahideen maneuvered to disrupt lines of communication between Kabul and several provincial cities. For example, in 1988, during the withdrawal, fighting in Kandahar intensified to a point where the Soviets had to evacuate by air.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, the public timetable prevented the transition of the Afghan military to a counterinsurgency force. This weak transition contributed to the defection of two Afghan regiments to the Mujahideen, totaling over 10,000 soldiers with

15 tanks, numerous tactical vehicles, weapons, and ammunition.<sup>7</sup> This defection surfaced as the tip of the iceberg for future Afghan soldiers who reverted to tribal loyalties instead of favoring national Afghan military service.

### **Economic**

The Soviet Union recognized that long term comprehensive aid to Kabul would determine the future stability of Afghanistan. This case study, despite the complexity of the Arab-Israeli peace process, provides a great tool for young leaders to understand strategies and the importance of understanding the problem from all sides. Via air, the Soviets delivered daily tons of weapons, ammunition, and equipment. The Soviets also flew in over 15,000 tons of flour monthly.<sup>8</sup> Soviet military aid transferred dozens of garrisons, months of reserve food, fuel, and ammunition, hundreds of military vehicles, and countless weapons systems (including missile systems) to the Afghan military.<sup>9</sup> The UN monitored Soviet aid contributions for over five million refugees with participants from the World Health Organization (WHO), UN Development Program (UNDP), and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union ended an over three billion dollars a year program for arms and ammunition, humanitarian aid, and other economic needs for Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> When the aid was terminated, this effectively reduced the capability of the Kabul government to maintain legitimate control over Afghanistan. In April 1992, the Mujahideen laid siege to Kabul, opening a new chapter of violence and the emergence of the Taliban and al Qaeda.

## **II. Planning Considerations for an Iraq Exit Strategy**

The following section highlights broad concepts for a withdrawal strategy from Iraq. These concepts stem from the Soviet lesson that any public timetable with no terms to amend the

process will only speed the withdrawal itself and set the stage for civil war and likely long term defeat in Iraq. Based upon these lessons, the US, as the guarantor of security, should consider a regional diplomatic accord that has international transparency and is enforceable via media pressure and by affected regional and international actors.

### **Diplomatic**

US diplomatic efforts should build international consensus for a negotiations strategy under the auspices of the United Nations or Arab League using a phased “compromise and enforcement” negotiations framework. These negotiations should include major regional players, influential tribal leaders such as those in Anbar province, and some non-extremist resistance groups that would provide solutions. The US would be a party to the negotiations as well, but would also remain as the security guarantor of the “compromise and enforcement” negotiations. The negotiations should approach this dilemma from a conflict resolution standpoint in order to prevent civil war and regional conflict between Sunni and Shi’a and maintain the balance of power. Just as the Soviets initiated negotiations early in Afghanistan, the US should have done so upon Phase IV of Operations Iraqi Freedom. Nevertheless, a “compromise and enforcement” approach remains a viable option for the US and would be accepted in domestic politics. US leaders should consider the following factors based on the Soviet lessons:

1. Giving due consideration to globalization and its impact on international relations theories, US-Iraq negotiations should nevertheless consider a realist balance of power approach towards security or the problem will likely unravel into regional conflict. Regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Iran have a stake in Iraq and any intensification of sectarian conflict and the specter of direct

- intervention by any regional actor due to minimal or no US to enforce the provisions of a negotiated exit strategy risks widespread violence and humanitarian crises.
2. Accept some concessions, although the nuclear option is a non-starter due to its risks, with Iran and Syria to persuade them to cease their practice of aiding Iraqi militias and terrorist movement between Iraq, Europe and North Africa. Although “compromise and enforcement” with Iran is difficult for many reasons, regional players and religious leaders can contribute to this process and further isolate Iran. The US cannot allow continued aid to resistance groups as they did during the Soviet-Afghan conflict. Past conflicts show that continued support to insurgents from an external ally normally result in their success. Therefore, US efforts must use diplomatic means to reduce the burden on sole military efforts to isolate Iraq and deny external support.
  3. Minimize US domestic politics during time of war and within the negotiations of any withdrawal strategy. Soviet politics affected the leadership decisions and the enemy exploited this opportunity. Currently, US frustration and upcoming elections are repeating Soviet-Afghanistan history in Iraq. This outcome would be disastrous since al Qaeda is already in Iraq.

### **Informational**

US Congress continues to push for a public withdrawal timetable from Iraq, despite senior US military advice that it would empower the enemy and lead to civil war. Despite an admirable Soviet media plan, the Mujahideen exploited the publicly announced nine month timetable by gaining positional advantage against the Kabul government. Today, US Joint Chiefs of Staff estimates believe a precipitous withdrawal would be “under combat



conditions.”<sup>12</sup> As the US heads into election debates and likely withdrawal negotiations, US leaders must remain cognizant of Soviet lessons from their withdrawal announcement. Below are some ideas for consideration:

1. Initiate another strong media embed program during the withdrawal phase to influence enemy forces and signatories to adhere to any “compromise and enforcement” agreements. The Soviets initially attempted this course, but their precipitous withdrawal undermined the negotiations and curtailed any media coverage of the withdrawal.
2. Develop a worldwide public relations campaign for the Iraqi government similar to the rebuilding of Kuwait following Desert Storm. The US should consider hiring public relations companies like Fleischmann-Hillard and others to build regional and international confidence in Iraq’s government and institutions. Of course, this plan requires a decision point where the Iraq Government is more effective in its governance and violence at a much lesser degree.

## **Military**

US military operations must heed three specific lessons provided by the Soviet publicly announced timetable with no provisos. First, the Mujahideen maneuvered along key military terrain to isolate Kabul and its ability to govern the countryside. Second, fear of withdrawal and future survival led Afghan Army leaders, like Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum, to defect to the resistance. Third, the public timetable prevented Soviet advisory efforts to fully transition Afghan forces to a counterinsurgency effort. Understanding these lessons enable the US military to better guarantee “compromise and enforcement” negotiations, while drawing down its

presence in the Middle East. Under a “compromise and enforcement” approach, the US should consider a phased methodology that balances the following military ways:

1. Modify US transition teams through the elimination of ad hoc MiTT teams and train company leadership in advisory efforts at a Combat Training Center (Forts Polk and Irwin and Hohenfoels and Marine centers) as part of their rotations. Long term consideration should be given to making advisory training a unit Mission Essential Task List (METL). This action promotes unity of command, maintains combat capability, increases flexibility in Special Operations Forces in the Global War on Terror, and reduces overall US military presence.
2. Synchronize US withdrawal with the array of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in key areas of sectarian violence and along seams of instability. These seams are where current successes will unravel. Place ISF in the lead for humanitarian operations, specifically refugee and displaced persons movements. US military priorities should transition to advisory efforts, wide area denial / border security, strategic population control, quick reaction capabilities in support of the ISF, and the destruction of al Qaeda and other extremist organizations.
3. Although risky, continue to allow local security forces similar to those in Anbar province and the *peshmerga* to bridge the gap between the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Police. This effort would provide US and Iraqi flexibility to target rogue militias and rebuild specific Iraqi police units.
4. The US must continue to provide the logistic support and fires support for the ISF. The ISF and other developing nations do not fully understand the idea of sustainment and maintenance in order to remain at an acceptable state of readiness. In addition,

US air transport, close combat aviation, and close air support must continue to support Iraq until the threat and Iraqi capability can stand alone.

## **Economic**

The US economic instrument of power remains the pillar of strength for US influence in Iraq and the Middle East. An exit strategy cannot forego the requirements of long term aid to Iraq and the region. Historical precedence exists in Vietnam and the Soviet-Afghan conflict concerning economic aid. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its aid to Kabul demonstrates how vital economic aid is to a wavering government. In Vietnam, the US Congress cut aid to South Vietnam, which contributed to the fall of the Saigon government to North Vietnam. The US Congress holds the “power of the purse” with respect to direct foreign assistance and should focus its debate in this area rather than by tying the hands of the Commander-in-Chief in Iraq with a publicly announced timetable. US domestic politics must debate this matter in parallel with a “compromise and enforcement” and consider the following ideas:

1. Agricultural aid in the form of alternative crop substitution, soil fertility, and other technical and institutional capacity building. Past decades limited access in the Iraqi agricultural sector. Therefore, to alleviate current agricultural deficiencies in Iraq, US programs should immediately improve programs in horticulture and livestock enterprises, while addressing underlying issues of water management countrywide.
2. Provide long term regional humanitarian aid for relocation efforts and employment opportunities for refugees and internally displaced persons within the region.
3. Military aid that provides competitive command and control capabilities, rotary wing to include aerial MEDEVAC, fixed wing lift capability, and adequate counter artillery / mortar capabilities.

4. Foreign Military Sales and Financing in the region in support of the Iraqi government, US interests, and regional balance of power.

### **III. Conclusion**

This paper hopes to further the study of negotiations from past conflicts so that lasting solutions will be achieved more than simply present another commentary on how to fight a counterinsurgency. Those “how to fight” studies should have been done in the past and, to be honest, are basically irrelevant at this point to the future of US policy in the Middle East and the future of Iraq. The current “surge” strategy is the right path to victory. However, the enemy is time as well. History suggests that political capital will diminish and a withdrawal to some level is inevitable. Therefore, this paper recommends a long term “compromise and enforcement” strategy based upon lessons from Soviet-Afghan withdrawal negotiations because a publicly announced timeline without provisos to modify or reverse the withdrawal process will lead to increased violence, civil war, and likely long term setback for US interests. A withdrawal strategy under a “compromise and enforcement” approach would endure over many years and US Administrations. The recommendations in this paper support the National Security Strategy and would improve the US image in the Middle East and further isolate radicalism. Remember, the US was not asked to invade Iraq and depose Saddam Hussein. The US went into Iraq thinking it had the answers. The US cannot leave simply because lasting solutions are difficult and costly. As the world leader, the US has a responsibility to provide a solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Grau, Lester, *Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, May 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Rogers, Tom. *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Analysis and Chronology*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1992). 19.

<sup>3</sup> Maley, William. *The Geneva Accords of April 1988 in The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, edited by Amin Saikal and William Maley. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1989). 24.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, Tom. *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Analysis and Chronology*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1992). 27.

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<sup>5</sup> Grau, Lester, *Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, May 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Rogers, Tom. *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Analysis and Chronology*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992). 39.

<sup>7</sup> Rogers. 223.

<sup>8</sup> Gromov, B.V. *Ogranichennyi kontingent (Limited Contingent)*, translated by Lester Grau of Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS. (Moscow: Progress, 1994). 311-316.

<sup>9</sup> Grau, Lester, *Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, May 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Rogers, Tom. *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: An Analysis and Chronology*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992). 213.

<sup>11</sup> Rubin, Barnett. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan. 2d Edition*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002). 109.

<sup>12</sup> Evan Thomas and Eve Conant. *Refusing to Lose*. Newsweek Magazine. 23 July 2007. Also found at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19762057/site/newsweek>.