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Iraq's Long-Term Impact on Jihadist Terrorism

By
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This article argues that the problems facing Iraq could have tremendous consequences for the broader “war on terror,” particularly if they return to or exceed levels seen at the height of the violence in 2006. Salafi militants, followers of an extreme interpretation of Islam who want to use violence to unite Muslims under religious rule, have been fighting in Iraq and may use the country as a base for operations and attacks elsewhere in the region. In addition, refugees from Iraq might spread terrorism, radicalize neighboring populations, and contribute to strife and instability throughout the region. While a U.S. troop withdrawal may inspire fewer young men to take up terrorism against the United States, it would also increase militants’ operational freedom in Iraq itself, allowing terrorist groups to recruit, train, and plan with relative impunity. As a result, if the United States withdraws from Iraq without leaving behind a stable Iraqi government, it should still maintain a regional military presence and help bolster other regimes in the Middle East from the threat of terrorism from Iraq.

Keywords: Iraq; terrorism; Middle East; refugees; military

The Americans are between two fires. If they remain [in Iraq] they will bleed to death, and if they withdraw they will have lost everything.

—Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri

In early 2003 al Qaeda was on the ropes. The United States and its coalition partners had roused it from Afghanistan and toppled the

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Taliban, while a global manhunt was steadily shutting down al Qaeda cells from Morocco to Malaysia. Perhaps equally important, many Islamists harshly criticized Osama bin Laden for having rashly attacked a superpower and, in so doing, causing the defeat of the Taliban, the only "true" Islamic regime in the eyes of many radicals.¹

The invasion of Iraq breathed new life into the organization. On an operational level, the United States diverted troops to Iraq rather than consolidating its victory in Afghanistan and increasing its chances of hunting down bin Laden. Today, al Qaeda is reconstituting itself in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Politically, Iraq vindicated bin Laden's argument that the primary enemy of the Muslim world was not the local Muslim autocrats but the "far enemy," the United States. Today, al Qaeda is again on the march (see Hoffman 2007; Riedel 2007, 27-29).

Toppling Saddam Hussein's regime was meant to usher in an era of prosperity for Iraq and put bin Laden and his followers on the run, but today, Iraq is torn by crime, plagued by a vicious insurgency, and devoid of competent government and basic services. The human and financial costs to the United States and its allies mount with each car bomb and kidnapping, from a recruiting point of view. Moreover, every additional day that the United States remains in Iraq is a boon for al Qaeda and the broader jihadist movement.

From a counterterrorism perspective, two things make America's policy predicament in Iraq difficult. First, the United States and its Iraqi allies have achieved impressive successes against al Qaeda in Iraq in the past year (Ricks and DeYoung 2007). Second, the problem of terrorism emanating from Iraq will not go away if the United States abandons the country to strife. By early 2007, the conflict had already generated more than 2 million refugees who could spread instability and terrorism to neighboring states. In Iraq, Salafi extremists from around the world, who wish to unite Muslims under religious rule, are learning new skills, forging new networks, and otherwise training to fight the next war as well as to defeat the United States and its Iraqi allies. There are no easy policy answers for Iraq, even from the narrow perspective of counterterrorism.

How then should the United States solve this conundrum? Of course, victory in Iraq cannot be judged entirely or even primarily in light of U.S. efforts against al Qaeda. Added to the mix are the importance of a stable oil-rich region, the human costs of a massive civil war, and the moral burden that the United States must bear in the eyes of the world for the carnage it unleashed. But just as counterterrorism was an important justification for the war, so too is it an important criterion for judging the next steps in this bloody challenge.

Iraq, as President George W. Bush has declared, has indeed become a "central front" in the war on terrorism (White House 2003)—largely because of the administration's policies, which have created a Salafi terrorist problem in Iraq where none existed. But criticism of the war does not solve the problem of what to do now in Iraq. This article looks at Iraq from a counterterrorism perspective, with a particular emphasis on the implications of a return to the chaos of 2006 (or worse), as would likely be the case if the United States were to precipitously withdraw from Iraq without leaving behind a stable security and political situation.

Iraq and the Sunni Insurgency

The recent Sunni “Awakening” in Anbar Province witnessed U.S.-backed Sunni tribal chiefs, many of them former insurgents, taking up arms against foreign terrorists in the region. The Awakening has allowed American forces to make impressive gains against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other Salafi terrorist groups in north, west, and central Iraq. But it is far too soon to count AQI out. History is littered with the corpses of countries who believed that they had eliminated an insurgency, only to have it come roaring back when they prematurely shifted their focus. The gains against AQI are not yet consolidated, and there are a variety of scenarios under which the movement could return in force to parts of Iraq where it now appears defeated.

Iraq's insurgency, which in its first years was concentrated in the Sunni Arab parts of Iraq, has been a major force in the country since early 2004, when large numbers of Sunni tribal shaykhs allied themselves with the remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime and a stream of foreign-born Salafi militants who had come to Iraq to wage war on the infidels. Far from a unified movement, the insurgency includes former regime cronies, members of the Ba'ath Party angered by the loss of their perks and privileges, foreign Sunni terrorists, domestic Sunni terrorists, Iraqi nationalists opposed to foreign occupation, Sunni tribesmen furious that Washington has handed their country over to vicious Shi'i chauvinists who dominate in Baghdad, as well as various Shi'i groups. These groups are further divided by tribe and leadership divisions, as well as competition for a share of the black market. Even among the Sunnis, AQI competes with other groups, such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades, Jaysh al-Islam, and Jaysh al-Muhammad, for recruits, resources, and targets. Not infrequently, members of these groups kill each other in addition to attacking Coalition forces, Iraqi security personnel, and members of the Shi'i community.

Since the U.S. occupation of Iraq began in 2003, foreign-born Salafi extremists have flocked to Iraq, making it a new center of their “jihad”—and in the process, they have transformed the nature of the anti-U.S. Iraqi resistance. Although only a portion of the insurgency consists of the Salafi militants, over the years their numbers have grown. A 2006 National Intelligence Estimate found that “the Iraq conflict has become the ‘cause celebre’ for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2006, 2). Most of the country's suicide bombings have been carried out by the one to two thousand foreign fighters who have come to Iraq from Arab countries. While those coming from Saudi Arabia comprise the lion's share of those killed, American military personnel report that Egyptians make up the largest number of foreign fighters captured by Coalition forces in Iraq (interviews with U.S. military personnel, Iraq, July 2007, conducted by Kenneth M. Pollack).

During the height of conflict in 2006, however, the number of Iraqi-born Salafi terrorists swelled. Indeed, this may be one of the most lasting effects of the U.S. invasion and occupation: the emergence of a domestic Salafi extremist movement

in Iraq, where none existed before. These Salafi militants are followers of an extreme interpretation of Islam and want to unite Muslims under religious rule, even if it means killing other Muslims. Salafi extremists hold many unpopular beliefs, including a view that democracy is a direct contradiction to the principles of Islam.

The Salafi militants are at the forefront of efforts to foment a sectarian war between Iraq's Shi'i and Sunni populations. They hate the Shia and also believe that spreading sectarian violence is a way to undermine the government. Salafi terrorists have attacked Shi'i shrines, pilgrims, political leaders, and other civilian targets (Paz 2005).

A classic al Qaeda pattern is to shift the direction of an insurgency by hijacking local grievances. In Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and now Iraq, the organization has sent fighters and other forms of support to assist Muslim insurgencies that typically began for nationalistic or ethnic reasons. Over time, the Salafi strand of thinking creeps in and begins to shape the resistance—a process well under way in Iraq, which had no significant domestic Salafi movement before the United States invaded.

The United States has tried to isolate the Salafi extremists from other parts of the Iraqi resistance in an attempt to divide the enemy. Former director of national intelligence John Negroponte testified that the Salafists' brutal actions and heavy-handed style have led them into conflict with their erstwhile allies, leading some Sunni tribal and nationalist groups to reach out to the government (Negroponte 2006). Real divisions have appeared between the more radical groups linked to al Qaeda and other Iraqi groups. Vicious fighting broke out after an al Qaeda affiliate declared Iraq to be an Islamic state and openly challenged the power of various tribal leaders. Sunni Arab tribal groups and other Iraqis that opposed the U.S. occupation but did not endorse AQI's goals and brutal methods confronted the jihadists. Many of the most important Coalition gains against AQI and other Salafi groups came as a result of this strategy, and by convincing a great many of the Sunni tribes that once provided the vast bulk of the manpower for the Sunni insurgency to switch sides and turn against the hardcore Salafi jihadists.

On the other hand, a number of fighters who could initially have been called Sunni nationalists or former regime elements are becoming more Islamist in their orientation. In a 2006 report, the International Crisis Group argued, "A year ago groups appeared divided over practices and ideology but most debates have been settled. . . . For now, virtually all adhere publicly to a blend of Salafism and patriotism" (p. i). Since that report was published, many Sunni tribesmen followed their tribal shaykhs regardless of their newfound Salafi zeal. But the report is not entirely dated. Many of the remaining Sunni insurgent groups holding out against the Coalition and their former allies among the Sunni tribes consist of Iraqis who came to Salafism after the fall of Saddam.

As the insurgency coalesced around Iraqi nationalism and Islamic extremism in late 2005 and 2006, it also became far more sophisticated in waging the war of ideas for overseas audiences. In 2004 and early 2005, the insurgents used such unpopular tactics as public beheadings and attacks on voters, including Sunni

voters supporting candidates who were sympathetic to resistance groups. Such gruesome attacks on civilians won them attention, but often revulsion as well (International Crisis Group 2006, 9). Today their public information campaign is much more coherent: they lambaste the United States and its local allies and deny sectarian violence. Videotaped beheadings have disappeared, and videos extolling their supposed successes appear with remarkable speed (International Crisis Group 2006, i-ii).

Iraq and the Global Fight against al Qaeda

The U.S. war in and occupation of Iraq has benefited the wider al Qaeda movement in many ways, including providing a recruiting tool. As Michael Scheuer, the former head of the CIA's bin Laden unit, sarcastically noted, "If Osama was a Christian—it's the Christmas present he never would have expected" (CBS News 2004). In the heart of the Muslim world, with more than one hundred thousand U.S. troops occupying the country for a long period of time, Iraq has become the focus of the media throughout the world and especially the Middle East. Arab and Muslim communities are united in their belief that the U.S. intervention is an attack on Islam and represents an attempt to subjugate a powerful Arab state. A study by Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank found that "the Iraq War has generated a stunning sevenfold increase in the yearly rate of fatal jihadist attacks, amounting to literally hundreds of additional terrorist attacks and thousands of civilian lives lost"—and that figure includes not only a surge in attacks in Iraq itself, but also an increase in the rest of the world (Bergen and Cruickshank 2007, 1-6).

Not surprisingly, Iraq has been at the center of al Qaeda's fund-raising and recruitment efforts. Fighting the United States is tremendously popular among radical and even mainstream Islamist circles and proof of bin Laden's "far enemy" theory: that for Muslims, the misdemeanors or even high crimes of their own governments (the "near enemy") are overshadowed by those of faraway Washington.² Within the broader Salafi community, Iraq proved an enormous public relations boon to al Qaeda. Many Salafists have condemned al Qaeda for being excessively violent and political, and in particular for its willingness to declare "jihad" at the drop of the hat. Even shaykhs critical of al Qaeda, however, see the struggle in Iraq as a legitimate defensive jihad, even in countries that are close allies of the United States. For example, in November 2004, twenty-six leading Saudi clerics wrote an "open letter to the Iraqi people" calling for a defensive jihad against the United States in Iraq (Jones 2005).

Iraq has fostered a new brand of jihad, providing a place where budding Salafi insurgents gain combat experience and forge lasting bonds that will enable them to work together in the years to come, even if they leave Iraq. Former French defense official Alexis Debat (2004, 22) contended that al Qaeda seeks "to turn Iraq into what Afghanistan was before autumn 2001: a public relations windfall for their ideologues, a training ground for their 'rookies,' and even a safe-haven

for their leadership.” Indeed, it is no small irony that some of those who launched attacks on U.S. and Afghan forces in Afghanistan appear to have trained in Iraq. Although it is unclear how many of those trained and “blooded” in Iraq have been killed in the fighting in Afghanistan, especially when the tide turned against them in 2007, some percentage had already departed Iraq and others may flee elsewhere even if U.S. counterinsurgency operations continue to scour Iraq of the Salafi militant presence.

For now, the Salafi terrorists are still focused on victory in Iraq, which they define not only as ousting the Americans but also as destroying the Iraqi regime and either murdering or subordinating Iraq’s Shi’i majority. In a media description of its Iraq strategy, al Qaeda in Iraq notes that its immediate goal is to drive a wedge between the American army and its local allies (Global Islamic Media n.d.). Soon afterwards, they say, the American occupiers will flee with their tails between their legs, and AQI will make Iraq a true Islamic republic. AQI would then launch the second part of its plan wherein Iraq would serve as base for attacking the country’s neighbors, such as Jordan and Syria. With that stage of the war complete, the final war will be waged on both the United States and Israel. In light of recent setbacks that AQI has suffered, its new objectives are simply survival and, if possible, reestablishing the strong position it enjoyed in 2006; however, a precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would provide the group with free rein to mobilize.

The views of the Salafi militant leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whom U.S. forces killed in June 2006, offer a fascinating but troubling glimpse into the potential future of the movement. Zarqawi founded and led the Monotheism and Jihad group, which in October 2004 became the al Qaeda Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers, also known as al Qaeda in Iraq. A Jordanian by birth, Zarqawi traveled to Afghanistan in 1989 to fight the Soviets. He became radicalized, however, when he returned to Jordan in the 1990s to organize a Salafi terrorist cell and was quickly put in prison (Husayn 2005). Although he detested the United States, Zarqawi never fully accepted bin Laden’s focus on the “far enemy,” directing his efforts instead toward the “near enemy” by fomenting dissent against other Muslims. Zarqawi viewed local regimes, particularly those near his home country of Jordan, as top targets.

Upon release from prison in 1999, Zarqawi quickly returned to terrorism. Al Qaeda helped provide start-up money for Zarqawi’s organization in Jordan, which tried to bomb various hotels and tourist sites during the millennium celebrations in 2000. Zarqawi himself went to Afghanistan to escape and continue to plot attacks. After the Taliban fell, he went to Iraq, where he correctly surmised the Americans would strike next.

In Iraq, Zarqawi stood out from other leaders, in part because of the brutality of his tactics. Zarqawi may have personally beheaded the American hostage, Nicholas Berg, who had been working in Iraq. Al Qaeda leaders pushed Zarqawi to abandon beheadings and similar tactics unpopular even among many Islamists. Inadvertently, however, U.S. condemnations placed Zarqawi into the world’s eye, which reaped dividends for him as a leader. His formerly obscure activities

became front-page news. Fu'ad Husayn (2005) claimed that because of U.S. attention, "Every Arab and Muslim who wished to go to Iraq for jihad wanted to join al-Zarqawi."

Although Zarqawi worked with al Qaeda for many years, he did not formally join the organization until October 2004 when he changed the group's name to al Qaeda in Iraq to reflect its new orientation. Zarqawi was an independent operator, and by personality he did not fit in well with al Qaeda, which stressed teamwork. In addition, he believed that local regimes were more important targets than the United States; he viewed the Shia as apostates "with no connection with Islam whatsoever," and in September 2005 he reportedly declared "all-out war" on them (Al-Jazeera 2005).

For al Qaeda, the merger with Zarqawi proved to be a lifeline. Al Qaeda was essentially gaining a franchise in the hub of the global jihad at a time when the organization was weak around the world. "Al Qaeda's operations and military activities were intermittent," Husayn argued in 2005. "However, following the pledge of allegiance of Abu-Mus'ab [Zarqawi] and his group, al Qaeda is there every day and every hour." Al Qaeda also gained access to more recruits from the Bilad al-Sham area (Jordan, Syria, and Palestine) from which Zarqawi drew, in contrast to its traditional links to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt.

For Zarqawi, the merger also had many benefits. Afterwards, Zarqawi obtained access to both al Qaeda's recruiting networks and, perhaps more important, received financial and logistical assistance, particularly from the Persian Gulf. The link with al Qaeda also legitimated Zarqawi, allowing him to associate his cause with that of bin Laden, a hero for many in the militant community.

Zarqawi had come under considerable fire in Salafi circles for his indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and the Shia in particular. Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who was Zarqawi's mentor in jail and was widely seen as a learned man, issued statements praising Zarqawi's goals but criticizing him for killing noncombatants in Iraq, noting, "It is better to leave a thousand atheists than to shed the blood of one Muslim." To make his point even clearer, he calls on Zarqawi to recognize that "*Mujahedin* should discriminate between Shi'ite citizens and fighters" (Husayn 2005).

Several memos to Zarqawi from Ayman Zawahiri—bin Laden's second-in-command—suggest the tension in the relationship. Zawahiri chastised Zarqawi for beheadings and other unpopular tactics while asking him to send money. Zarqawi toned down some of his most horrific tactics, but after his death the Salafi jihadists in Iraq are still marching to a radicalized drummer.

The Consequences of a U.S. Withdrawal for Counterterrorism

From the counterterrorism perspective, the case for leaving Iraq appears strong on the surface. Muslims who object to the U.S. occupation of one of the

historic centers of the Muslim world would be appeased, removing at least one source of opposition to the United States. Resources devoted to Iraq could be used to fight bin Laden and affiliated jihadists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere, while the constant irritation in the relationship between the United States and its European allies would be removed. Unfortunately, a near-term American withdrawal from Iraq could create additional counterterrorism problems even as it solves others.³

The presence of American troops occupying one of the greatest states of the Arab heartland does inspire sizable numbers of Muslims to journey to Iraq to kill Americans—and their Shi'i and Kurdish allies—and boosts al Qaeda's efforts to recruit new adherents around the world. At the same time, the American military presence in Iraq is a major inhibiting factor when it comes to the ability of al Qaeda and other Salafi jihadist groups to use Iraq as a base of operations from which to launch attacks on other nations, including the U.S. homeland. American forces and their Iraqi allies (especially since the "Anbar Awakening") have killed large numbers of these men and keep the rest very well occupied. Although some attacks against other countries have been staged from Iraq, so far they have been few in number given the turbulence in that country. If the United States were to withdraw from Iraq altogether, the Salafi extremists would lose their recruiting poster but likely gain considerable freedom of action and improved ability to mount attacks abroad.

This scenario would be similar to what happened in Afghanistan. During the 1979 to 1989 war, twenty-five to thirty thousand Arabs (and perhaps as many as seventy thousand foreign-born Muslims altogether) traveled to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the USSR (Bergen 2001, 55; Hoffman 2003, 9). During that time, these men were focused on the Soviets, and even leaders like bin Laden paid little attention to other enemies, such as the Saudis and the Americans. Once the Soviets withdrew, the vast majority of the Arabs and other foreign-born Muslims went home and gave up the fight. However, a hard core remained. Some members formed the organization we know as al Qaeda, which then turned its attention on other foes. Some continued to wage war in Afghanistan, this time as part of the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal, and eventually threw their support behind the Taliban. Other parts of the organization, however, turned their attention to other targets—initially Arab governments like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but then the United States—and the anarchy of Afghanistan and the friendship of the Taliban gave them much greater ability to mount such attacks. Tens of thousands more Arabs came to train and fight during these periods of anarchy and Taliban rule.

The impact on Iraq. Unfortunately, a likely scenario for Iraq in the event of a near-term American withdrawal is chaos and all-out civil war akin to that experienced by Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, Afghanistan from 1989 to 2001, the Congo from 1994 to the present, and the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1999. The incompetent handling of the reconstruction between 2003 and 2006 created a security vacuum, a failed state, and a leadership void that have left Iraq a desperate and dangerous society (see, for instance, Pollack 2006). Thanks in part to

the efforts of al Qaeda and other Salafi extremist groups who systematically went about taking advantage of these American mistakes, Iraqi society has been torn apart.

In the realm of counterterrorism, the first blow of such a scenario would be to U.S. credibility. Al Qaeda and other Salafi extremists would tout a withdrawal as a victory, contending that the United States left under fire. Even though their actual role in the fighting was minimal, foreign fighters made similar claims with regard to the Soviets in Afghanistan and the United States in Somalia. Iraq is a far bigger conflict than any the United States previously waged in the Middle East. And because foreign terrorists have played such a significant part in Iraq, they would declare, with much fanfare, that the U.S. departure was a major victory for their cause.

Bin Laden's "success" would indicate that the United States would withdraw whenever it faces considerable resistance. Other Salafi extremists would thus be encouraged to foment unrest against other governments they oppose and against U.S. interventions such as those in Afghanistan and the Balkans. The lesson would be clear: push the United States and it will fold.⁴ At the same time, other Salafi jihadists in the Zarqawi mold would seek to foment a civil war, both because it would hasten a U.S. departure and because of their hatred for secular and Shi'i forces. They can be counted on to fuel the fire of extremism, making it difficult for moderate voices to be heard.

If there is a bright side to civil war, it is that the global Salafi extremist movement could be diverted. As Zarqawi's statements and deeds made clear, he and his followers were more hostile to the Shia, and perhaps to what he regarded as local apostate regimes, than to the United States. Without the U.S. presence, the fighters may focus on killing other Iraqis rather than killing Americans, and over time killing fellow Muslims could discredit their cause. This would plunge Iraq further into the nightmare of war, however. In addition, the Salafi jihadists and the rest of the opposition in Iraq have little to unify them beyond getting rid of the United States. Infighting would almost certainly increase should U.S. troops depart, while some foreign fighters would move on to other causes, such as the anti-Russian struggle in Chechnya, that do not directly threaten American lives and vital interests.

We should not assume that all of Iraq would fall under the Salafi jihadists' sway. The recent blows have diminished AQI's strength, which even at its height had limits. Iraq's Shi'i majority and large Kurdish population would fiercely resist AQI, as would many Sunni Arabs. However, some Sunnis would likely decide to shelve their grievances with the Salafi fighters in the name of making common cause against the Shia and Kurds. Even if the Salafi terrorist presence in Iraq remained limited to no more than a few thousand fighters, it would exert disproportionate influence in the absence of any alternative.

Beyond Iraq. The potential blow to U.S. credibility and civil war in Iraq (which may be inevitable whether or not the United States remains in Iraq) are only part of the price of withdrawal. Most worrisome, Iraq has become a new "field of jihad," a place where radicals come to meet, train, fight, and forge bonds that last when they leave Iraq for the West or for other countries in the region. If the

situation returns to its 2006 nadir, Iraq could become a new terrorist haven comparable to or perhaps exceeding Afghanistan under the Taliban (Bergen and Reynolds 2005). Right now, the U.S. military presence shapes the scale of the jihadist effort: there is no equivalent to the massive training camps or above-ground existence that the radicals enjoyed in Afghanistan. Should U.S. withdrawal allow the formation of such a base, jihadists could organize and train to strike at U.S. or allied facilities around the world, including in the U.S. homeland. Moreover, ensuring that area tribes remain vigilant against al Qaeda appears to depend on the presence of U.S. forces and the material support they provide.

The jihadists who would rise from Iraq's ashes would be far more capable fighters than they were when they first arrived in the land of the two rivers. Many Muslims came to Iraq to expel the United States from Muslim lands; many Iraqis took up arms for the same reason. In the course of the conflict, however, their agendas grew broader. Exposed to hardened terrorists like Zarqawi, their ambitions and grievances went beyond Iraq, expanding their agenda to embrace one closer to the al Qaeda core.

The war served a Darwinian function for jihadist fighters; those who survived ended up better trained, more committed, and otherwise more formidable than when they began. Unfortunately, the skills they picked up in Iraq—sniper tactics, experience in urban warfare, an improved ability to avoid enemy intelligence, and use of man-portable surface-to-air missiles—are readily transferable to other theaters. The insurgents have also learned how to get through U.S. checkpoints, which are far less formidable on U.S. borders than they are in the war zone of Iraq. The ethos that glorifies suicide bombing has spread as well. The United States and its allies are more likely to face young men and women willing to kill themselves as they kill others, making targets much harder to defend. Most important, the jihadists have learned how to use improvised explosive devices, the greatest killer of U.S. forces in Iraq, and these devices have already shown up in Kuwait.

The greatest immediate danger is to Iraq's neighbors, which include several close U.S. allies. Bergen and Cruickshank (2007, 1-6) argued that Iraq's effect on terrorism is partially a function of geographic proximity, the level of exchange between Iraqi and domestic groups in the other country, and how much the local population identifies with Iraqi Arabs.⁵ For all of Iraq's neighbors, particularly in the Arab states, these conditions hold, even though the current danger is less than it was in 2006.

AQI would be particularly likely to reach out and strike Saudi Arabia given the long, lightly patrolled border between the two countries and bin Laden's well-documented interest in destabilizing the Al Saud family, which rules the heartland of Islam. Ties are tight: resistance groups in Iraq have at times turned to Saudi religious scholars to validate their activities (International Crisis Group 2006, 10). A great many of the Arabs fighting in Iraq are Saudis. As Reuven Paz (2005, 6) noted, "The Iraqi experience of these mainly Saudi volunteers may create a massive group of 'Iraqi alumni' that will threaten the fragile internal situation of the desert kingdom."

The turmoil in Iraq has also energized young Saudi Islamists, who see it as emblematic of broader problems facing the Muslim world. For now, many Saudi Salafi extremists have decided to fight in Iraq, in part because doing so is a clearer "defensive jihad" than struggling with the Al Saud (International Crisis

Group 2006, 12). If the United States left Iraq, the balance would shift from Saudis helping Iraqi fighters to Iraqi fighters helping Saudis. Such a development is not likely to lead to the collapse of the Saudi government, but even a few dozen terrorists operating from Iraq could foster civil strife, attack Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure, and otherwise cause unwelcome unrest in a critical ally with many existing internal problems. A particular risk is that the anti-Shia sentiment of AQI members could lead to concerted attempts to sow sectarian strife in the Kingdom, preying on Saudi Arabia's own domestic tensions.

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The November 9, 2005, attacks on three hotels in Amman, Jordan, that killed sixty people may be a harbinger. The attacks were carried out by Iraqis, though Zaraqawi, a Jordanian, orchestrated them. Because the attackers were foreigners, Jordan's impressive security forces did not have long dossiers on them, as it does on many domestic radicals. Jordan is likely to suffer further, as it is a major destination for Iraq's refugees. In addition, Jordanian intelligence claims that three hundred fighters have gone from Jordan to Iraq and back (Bergen and Cruickshank 2007, 5).

European intelligence services are also intensely concerned about Iraq, since dozens, perhaps hundreds, of European Muslims are going to Iraq to fight. So far, these individuals have not returned to Western Europe, but European officials believe that it is only a matter of time.

The war in Iraq has several implications for the U.S. homeland. The more global ideology that jihadists pick up in Iraq, to say nothing of their new skills, the more likely and more able they will be to strike U.S. targets. The war in and occupation of Iraq have also energized members of the European Muslim community, who can enter the United States easily because of their European passports, have the skills to function in the United States, and now have the cause.

Shifting to Containment

Despite these risks and despite recent gains, a new president may choose to draw down American forces from Iraq in the belief that the costs are no longer justified by the prospects of success. In addition to the problems withdrawal may bring Iraq, the United States would face a short-term blow in prestige as al Qaeda and other opponents of the United States would tout any drawdown as a

victory. Initially, such a perception will be hard to deny, as images of departing U.S. forces will bolster the picture of defeat.

Even if the United States opts to reduce its forces in Iraq, Washington must recognize that terrorists will continue to find a home in Iraq and will use it as a base to conduct attacks outside the country. Thus, from a counterterrorism point of view, it is important to contain the Salafi terrorist problem in Iraq if it cannot be completely defeated. To do so, a limited number of U.S. forces will have to remain in and/or near Iraq. Many will be devoted to the problems of assisting refugees, preventing neighboring states from massively intervening, and otherwise trying to stop the Iraq disaster from metastasizing further. However, one of the most important tasks for the United States is to limit the ability of terrorists to use Iraq as a haven for attacks outside the country. The best way to do that will be to retain assets (particularly air power, special operations forces, and a major intelligence and reconnaissance effort) in the vicinity to identify and strike major terrorist facilities like training camps, bomb factories, and arms caches before they can pose a danger to other countries. The goal would be to stop parts of Iraq from becoming terrorist centers on the scale of the Taliban's Afghanistan. Iraq's centrality and oil resources make it an even more ideal hub than Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet the Salafi extremists in Iraq spend much of their time fighting Americans, Shia, and other Sunnis and cannot train (and relax) on the same scale as they could when they enjoyed the Taliban's hospitality.

To keep the haven limited as the United States draws down forces, Washington should continue to make intelligence collection in Iraq a high priority, and whenever a terrorist facility is identified, U.S. forces should move quickly to destroy it. When possible, the United States would work with various factions in Iraq that share our goals regarding the local terrorist presence, giving them money, training, supplies, and other assistance. We should be under no illusions, however: these fighters will not be under U.S. control, and many of these groups are also hostile to other U.S. interests in the region. Moreover, our ability to conduct intelligence operations in Iraq and rely on various Iraqi groups to provide us with the information we need will likely decline in direct proportion to the diminution of our role in providing security and political support to the country. Once we divorce ourselves from the key issues facing the Iraqis, Iraqi incentives to help us will evaporate accordingly. And since 2003 it has been the Iraqis who have provided the best information on the Salafi terrorist groups—not our satellites, listening devices, or special forces units.

This approach is difficult because it does not remove the U.S. military presence from the region. If such strike forces were based in Iraq's neighbors, they would upset the local population and might face limits by host governments on the ability to operate in Iraq. This was exactly the set of problems the United States encountered during the 1990s, and which led Washington to eliminate many of its military facilities in the region after the invasion of Iraq.

Maintaining American troops in Iraq, even at reduced levels, would have negative repercussions on the terrorism threat as well, since their presence could continue to be used by jihadists as a recruiting tool; and American troops would

continue to be targets of terrorist attacks, although redeploying them from Iraq's urban areas to the periphery would diminish the threat from current levels.

Beyond military actions, the United States must work hard to increase the governmental capacity of neighboring states. The flow of refugees is one particular concern, as refugees who are not assimilated or well policed may carry conflict with them. In addition, the bored and uprooted young men in the refugee camps are prime recruits for terrorist groups. Washington should assist Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other allies in managing refugee flows and ensuring that settlements are properly policed. In addition, strengthening military and intelligence training programs for neighboring countries is essential so that they can better manage any unrest that occurs in their countries. A diplomatic priority should be to discourage Iraq's neighbors from meddling in Iraq, particularly on behalf of the Salafi extremists.

Washington should continue to make intelligence collection in Iraq a high priority, and whenever a terrorist facility is identified, U.S. forces should move quickly to destroy it.

Finally, the United States will have to recognize the limits of what can be accomplished. Terrorism in Iraq has flourished despite the presence of 150,000 U.S. troops; it is absurd to expect that fewer troops could accomplish more. Over time, Iraq may become less of a recruiting cause for anti-U.S. terrorists, but in the short term the operational advantages al Qaeda and other terrorists gain are likely to outweigh this potential loss for them. Through continued military, intelligence, and diplomatic engagement, the United States will have to try to reduce the frequency of attacks and the scale of the training and other activities, but our expectations must by necessity be modest.

Notes

1. This article draws on Byman and Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraq Civil War* (2007); Byman, "Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism" (2007a); and Byman, "Who Wins in Iraq: Al Qaeda" (2007b).

2. For a review of this thesis, see Fawaz A. Gergez, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (2005).

3. Although this article deals specifically with the impact of chaos in Iraq—as a result either of the failure of the surge strategy or a rapid withdrawal of American forces from Iraq—specifically on counterterrorism concerns, it is important to keep in mind always that counterterrorism would be only one aspect of

American interests and regional stability that likely would be affected. For a more thorough description of the broader risks involved, as well as recommendations for how the United States should handle them, see Byman and Pollack (2007).

4. The jihadists' conspiratorial worldview is already making much of its "victory" so far in Iraq. See Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting It Right* (2002, 38).

5. Another factor they cite is whether the countries in question have troops in Iraq, which would not apply to neighboring states.

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