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TERRORISM ALERT: 'WASTE DEEP IN THE BIG MUDDY' OF IRAQ

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The Bush administration appears to be in a state of denial about the seriousness of the violence in Iraq. US troops are being killed or wounded daily in violence directed and organized by Sunnis in central Iraq. The violence is not primarily driven by Saddam loyalist but by young, religious leaders driven by the same rage that has driven so many other Sunni Islamic terrorists. The US Armed Forces are too few in number to control the violence. Two few "coalition" members have committed forces. Secretary Rumsfeld has so far denied a request by Paul Bremer for more troops.

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A Guerrilla War In Iraq

Before the US war against Saddam Hussein, I predicted that the outcome would, eventually, resemble the fate that befell the Israelis after their invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. The Israelis had liberated Lebanon from its near total control by the PLO, which had fled to Lebanon after losing its war against King Hussein in Jordan in 1970. After a rapid and total Israeli military victory in the summer of 1982, Yasir Arafat and his PLO fighters were put on freighters in Beirut and exiled to Tunisia. But in 1983, hundreds of US and French marines were killed in separate terrorist bombings in Beirut and the US pulled out. By 1986, the Israelis had fled from Lebanon, unwilling to sustain the low level of casualties that were being constantly inflicted on their armed forces.

Before the US war against Saddam Hussein, I suggested that the Iraqis would turn against the US, as the Lebanese had turned against the Israelis, seeing them as occupiers rather than liberators and that a turn against the US would come to be one way the Iraqis could generate a national identity and create a unified Iraq.

The turn against the US in Iraq has already occurred. (Like all other processes in our age, the transformation of the US from liberators to occupiers occurred more quickly than was conceivable two decades ago for the Israelis in Lebanon.)

The most dangerous part of this story, however, is not in Baghdad, but in Washington. The Bush administration appears to be in a state of denial about the seriousness of the US position in Iraq.

*Since President Bush declared an end to hostilities on May 1, at least 64 Americans have been killed in Iraq, compared with a total of 138 during the entire war against Saddam.

*The looting that began shortly after the ouster of Saddam and that stripped bare so many government offices, factories, power plants, and even hospitals, schools, and archeological sites, has continued. Oil production and exports are being interrupted. So is the supply of dependable electrical power to Baghdad.

What has become increasingly obvious is that the deaths of American soldiers and the looting in Baghdad and Basra are the product of organized opposition to the US occupation. The US is now in a guerrilla war—a low intensity conflict—in Iraq. The killings of Americans are not the product of disgruntled, lone, Saddam loyalists. They are the product of determined opposition to the US.

Sunni Iraqi Opposition to the United States

For the present, the violent opposition appears to be largely the work of Sunnis from central Iraq. The explosion in a Sunni Mosque in Falluja on July 1 that resulted in the deaths of at least nine Iraqis was the apparent result of an accident during a bomb making class. On July 2, six American soldiers were wounded west of Baghdad when their Humvees were attacked and on the same day another soldier was wounded in an attack in downtown Baghdad.

These attacks have been labeled the product of resentment by die-hard Saddam loyalists and disgruntled Baath Party members. The truth is that the opposition among Sunnis is much more widespread than is suggested by the Bush administration. To label the opposition as disgruntled Saddam and Baath loyalists misses the depth and breadth of the opposition.

(Of course there is some truth to the Bush charge. On some level, as a result of Saddam's overthrow, all Sunnis are "losers." Saddam is a Sunni and ruled Iraq largely through the armed forces run by Sunni officers and a Baath Party dominated by Sunnis. Furthermore, it is inevitable that in any reconstituted Iraqi government, Sunnis will become even bigger losers. They are a minority in Iraq, outnumbered by Shiites and, perhaps, even by Kurds. Those other two groups will assume new responsibilities in any post-Baath Iraqi government—powers denied them by Saddam.)

That bomb making classes were being conducted in a Sunni Mosque is an especially threatening development. While Americans charge Shiite Iran as the leading "terrorist state" and the bombings of the US and French marine barracks in 1983 were the work of Shiites, most of the world's recent terrorism has, in fact, been perpetrated by Sunnis. The leaders of Al Qaeda, all the September 11 murderers, the PLO suicide bombers, and the Bali bombers were Sunnis. The rise of terrorism on the part of Iraqi Sunnis threatens immense violence ahead.

And more Sunni terrorism against the US is likely. For the first decades of his rule, Saddam ran a ruthlessly secular state. But after the first Gulf War, he sought to bolster his own popularity within Iraq and throughout the Middle East by building Sunni mosques and financing Sunni religious education. (No such largesse was extended to Shiite institutions, which were feared as a front for Iranian Shiite revolutionary ideology.)

The result has been to produce a new crop of young, Sunni religious leaders of just the right age to turn to violence. The Imam, or spiritual leader of the mosque in Falluja, killed along with six others, after the explosion in the bomb making class, had not reached his 25th birthday. His newly appointed successor has just had his 25th birthday. Both of them were products of Saddam's post-1991 turn towards the Sunni faith.

In short, the violence now directed at US soldiers is coming from the Sunnis of Iraq. Their violence against the US is not generated because they are the "losers" in a post-Saddam Iraq or because they are Saddam loyalists. They have turned to violence for the same reason that so many in the world of Sunni Islam have turned to violence and terrorism.

The US Responds

President Bush displayed his usual macho style of bravery yesterday, July 2, when he told reporters, "There are some who feel like conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is: Bring them on. We have the force necessary to deal with the situation."

By all accounts, however, the US does not have the force necessary to deal with the new terrorism.

The United States has 150,000 troops in Iraq. The British have about 10,000. Other members of the "coalition of the willing" have sent token forces: Albania, 100; the Czech Republic, 306; Denmark, 367; Estonia, 36; Italy, 800; Latvia, 36; Lithuania, 43; Macedonia, 28; Philippines, 175; Poland, 250; Portugal, 120; Ukraine, 1800. The Netherlands has promised to send 1100 troops and Poland, another 2000.

India has recently rebuffed a US request to send 20,000 troops on the grounds that they cannot serve under a US commander. A United Nations resolution would solve that problem. Germany and Russia have refused US requests to send peacekeepers without an explicit UN resolution, on the grounds that such a resolution would provide greater legitimacy for the occupation and would diminish the violence against the foreign troops. The US has steadfastly refused to ask the UN for such a resolution.

France did not have to deny any US request for troops because the US has also steadfastly refused to ask France to send peacekeeping troops.

In Congressional testimony before the start of the war, Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki argued that hundreds of thousands of troops would be necessary to stabilize a post-Saddam Iraq. Secretary Rumsfeld and Deputy Wolfowitz slammed the General (who has now been retired from the armed forces) on the grounds that his estimates had nothing to do with Iraqi realities.

The word from Baghdad is that the US administrator, Paul Bremer, has asked for a substantial boost in US troop strength. The request has been denied by the Pentagon.

Conclusion

The armed resistance to the US in Iraq is being driven by Sunnis. The Shiite areas of Iraq are increasingly restive, complaining that US officials, especially Zal Khalilzad, the US Emissary to the "Free Iraqis," promised that Iraq would be turned over to Iraqis as soon as Saddam was overthrown. But so far, the Shiites have not turned to violence, despite all the US accusations against Iran for its support of Iraqi Shiites. The Kurds are quiet, continuing to run the Kurdish north as a virtually autonomous area, as they had under Saddam.

Armed resistance to the US occupation of Iraq is likely to grow and not diminish as the US fails to restore vital services—electricity is still being delivered to Baghdad for fewer hours per day than Saddam supplied—and as Sunnis are energized by a new crop of young hot-head clerics.

The United States armed forces are significantly understaffed in Iraq.

The United States armed forces are stretched thin across the globe with troops based in Korea and Japan and serving in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Djibouti, the Philippines, around the Persian Gulf and in a number of other countries pursuing terrorists. President Bush is apparently ready to commit another 1000 troops to Liberia. Active duty reservists in Iraq cannot be released from service. Secretary Rumsfeld does not want to call up the National Guard.

The President and his senior advisers appear to be in a state of denial about the seriousness of the Iraqi dilemma. A very deep disquiet has settled over the Washington foreign policy community.

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