The War in Iraq and the War on Terror

The Rumsfeld memorandum of October 2003 has served as an occasion for some to voice their concerns about American progress in both Iraq and the "war on terror," and for others to try to defend the course of American policy.

The two areas of concern overlap, obviously, to the degree that Iraq itself be-comes either a battleground in the struggle against terrorism or a stimulus to acts of terror elsewhere. At the same time, however, the two should not be treated as simple continuations of each other. While American difficulties in Iraq may owe something – how much is not yet clear – to broader terrorist activities, Iraq is also very much its own theatre of activity. It would be a matter of the greatest interest to compare and contrast patterns of violence in different areas – the Kurdish north, the Shia areas and the "Sunni triangle," for example – and as well to correlate these with the differing practices and characteristics of the occupying forces. Has the experience of the British differed substantially from that of the Marines, the US Airborne units, US Army units in the Sunni triangle, the Polish-led international sector? Could it be that the US must re-think its reluctance to train its troops in the arts of "peacekeeping?" It would appear at least that official estimates of the number of troops needed post-war were seriously mistaken.

The situation in Iraq is made more complex by reporting patterns in the media, which (in North America, at least) seem to emphasize events in Baghdad, for example, over events elsewhere. The media coverage focuses attention, mistakenly, on the secondary issue of local attacks on small numbers of troops. It ignores the larger implications: the attacks do not weaken the US, but rather hamper US-Sunni co-operation, which in turn affects the role of the Shia population in the post-war period.

While broader forces seek to make Iraq an American Afghanistan, calls for a rapid US withdrawal, whether or not in favour of a more multinational force, should also be considered carefully. A precipitate withdrawal could have a variety of unwelcome consequences. If power is left lying in the streets of Iraq, there are more than enough groups willing to claim it – with potential threats to Iraq's very existence (and for the broader region) as well as to the population as the rivalries sort themselves out. A civil war would not be an entirely unlikely outcome if sufficient outside power is not available in Iraq to "hold the ring," or at least to give a nascent central government a decent chance to establish itself.

More generally, the "war on terror" has always been an extremely misleading phrase, inviting uncomfortable parallels with the "war on drugs," and suggesting to some, at least, the dangers of casting all security questions in a too-easily and too-exclusively military vocabulary. Other elements of a successful fight against terrorism lack the immediacy and the media values of a military response, and therefore may be overlooked, whether by policy-makers or by the media. A successful policy on terror undoubtedly re-quires a strong coercive component. Undoubtedly as well, it requires far more than a military component to be successful: even conventional wars have political components that give meaning and direction to the mere clash of arms.

One of the problems here is precisely that the "roots of terrorism" debate has itself fallen victim to ideological posturing that impedes serious analysis. On the political left, there were occasional instances after September 11, 2001 of rather indecent willingness to rejoice in the comeuppance given to the Americans. On the political right, there was a tendency to a view that can only partially be caricatured as "they hate us because we are so good." While more credible analyses are now coming forward, it may still be difficult to gain them a hearing at the political level, given both their complexity and the issues they raise.

Whether some like it or not, the "roots of terrorism" must be addressed – though this is not to be confused with a call for sympathy. Refusal to do this is to condemn one-self to treating symptoms only and, as the Rumsfeld memo suggests, to trying to deal with would-be terrorists faster than they can be generated. This, in turn, means that issues of policy, not merely tactics, must be addressed. As the United States has already discovered, mere "re-branding" is unlikely to work if the product is not attractive in the first place. This does not mean that the United States must change policies that tend to arouse the animosity of Muslim populations. It obviously retains the choice not to do so, if it judges this to be in its interest. It does mean that the implications of policy choices are fair questions to raise.

Finally, however, as terror is a social and political phenomenon, not simply a matter of violence, its context in various specific locations has to be recognized. Most terror-ism, after all, is domestic in origin and focus, not international. It can, however, be led into international connections. In that sense, any sustained effort against "terrorism" as such *must* address the circumstances that generate terrorists, or at least toleration or sup-port for them. Since this will inevitably touch on the domestic circumstances and policies of states, this is clearly where the greatest difficulties will likely arise.

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