

Iraq and the Problem of Terrorism

Adil E. Shamoo | January 24, 2006

Last year, 5,736 Iraqis died and 845 U.S. soldiers died in the Iraq War, many at the hands of the estimated 2,000 foreign terrorist fighters based in the U.S.-occupied country. If this conflict is part of a larger war on terrorism as President George W. Bush claims, it's clear the U.S. is losing the so-called "global war on terror."

Prior to the March 2003 invasion by the United States, Iraq was not a hotbed of terrorism. It's true that Saddam Hussein was connected to terrorism by his payments to families of Palestinian suicide bombers. But this act of bravado was meant to boost his image in the Arab world. As horrific as that support was, the continued attacks in the years since Saddam was toppled illustrate that payment to families was not the main fuel for continued attacks on Israel. It merely fed an image that helped to distract from Saddam's misdeeds.

Today Iraq is entirely transformed. The country lacks both safety and security and suffers from daily kidnappings, frequent car bombings, and other violent attacks. And with porous borders and poor intelligence gathering U.S. efforts to truly secure Iraq have fairly come in to question. In 2005 there were 841 car bombs and an average of 70 attacks per day on U.S. forces.

Sadly, terrorism sometimes works in achieving intended goals. While this may be a shocking notion to some, it's hard to deny that the U.S. left Somalia and Beirut because of terrorist activities. And clearly, the U.S. is mired in Iraq due in no small part to terrorist acts.

Unfortunately, Bush's plan of maintaining a large U.S. military presence has not lowered the overall number of terrorists, the frequency of their attacks, or improved the security for ordinary Iraqis over

the last three years. Nor has the increase of Iraqi soldiers improved the security situation.

Furthermore, the United States is paying too much attention to fighting the terrorists on the streets of Baghdad while giving other solutions short shrift. In fact, the recent announcement that the U.S. will halt further reconstruction efforts reinforces the notion that the only actions the U.S. can take are military.

Another mistake is also being made, equating all attacks in Iraq as acts of terrorism. By narrowly focusing on terrorism, Bush has clouded a much larger problem, the large anti- U.S. occupation movement in Iraq and the roughly 18,000 Iraqis who are not al-Qaeda members but are arming themselves to fight U.S. occupying forces. Nationalist Iraqis fighting to throw out American forces have been lumped together with the terrorists with those whose jihadist aims are quite different from those fighting occupation of their country.

While these two different groups have different motivations, similar approaches can be taken to help diffuse them. Military options should still be on the table for confronting the most violent offenders but they must be accompanied by a multi-dimensional policy that addresses the basic causes and conditions that facilitate terrorism.



This means the U.S. government must stop supporting police states, corrupt and repressive regimes now. The government must use its economic power and influence to reduce poverty in these countries and not just force free markets. The U.S. must promote equality among the citizens of this difficult but crucial region. And finally, the government must promote human rights not just military might.

While the Bush administration has recently changed some of its rhetoric, the underlying policies have not changed sufficiently, especially those surrounding the issues of free elections, free speech, freedom of the press, and torture. These policies must be changed if we are to help to ameliorate the conditions that affect the masses in the Arab world.

As powerful as these changes would be, it is clear at this point that they would not be sufficient. The grievances against the U.S. occupation are simply too large. After nearly three years of war, the U.S. military presence only provides the motivation to enlarge, not to reduce, the number of those opposing the occupation. While withdrawal seems count-

er-intuitive, it is one of the few options remaining that has the potential to lessen the increase in terrorists and those fighting the occupation.

As long as the social and economic conditions remain along with 138,000 U.S. troops, there will be a movement in Iraq and throughout the Arab world that will oppose the U.S., and the spectrum of that opposition will be one that includes those who commit acts of terrorism.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Adil Shamoo, “Iraq and the Problem of Terrorism,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 24, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3088>

Production Information:

Writer: Adil Shamoo

Editor: Erik Leaver, IPS

Layout: Erik Leaver, IPS

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