

A stain that may spread

No matter who wins elections (or even a civil war) in Iraq, a further danger is the dissemination of insurgency in the Middle East.

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December 12, 2004

Star-Telegram

The battle for Fallujah, the first act in preparing for the Iraqi elections, is over. More than 2,000 insurgents are reported to have died, against much smaller numbers of U.S. and Iraqi military casualties. Civilian deaths, though fewer in number, may never be accurately reported.

Seizure of the town uncovered not only arsenals and bomb factories but also scenes of the most repulsive acts of kidnapping, torture and murder by the so-called Islamic armies of God, who have raised snuff films to the level of warfare.

Although this fight might have been prevented had U.S. forces been sufficient to garrison the town when it was first occupied, the battle was necessary to secure Iraq in advance of the elections still scheduled -- after some hesitation -- for the end of January.

Those elections will be the most significant event in the Iraq war since the fall of Baghdad. If successful, the elections would tip the balance in Iraq toward Iraqis who want to see a pluralistic, Westward-facing country, and against an insurgency that thus far is interested only in destruction and chaos.

It will be an uphill fight. Until now, the best efforts of the United States and the emerging Iraqi army have not succeeded in preventing the growth of the insurgency. The most hopeful sign has been the continued willingness of a significant portion of the Iraqi people to rebuild their government and their civic institutions in the face of terror. The latest evidence of their determination has been the rejection, by the majority Shia religious leadership, of proposals to delay the election until the security situation improves.

Insurgents of all stripes know that the conduct of even fractionally successful elections will be a major blow, and their present campaign of intimidation and mayhem is designed to prevent Iraqis from heading to the polls. If elections are held successfully, in the teeth of the insurgency, then the decisive battles of this war may well occur in the spring, as votes are counted and preparations are made for the seating of an elected Iraqi parliament in June.

Although generalizations are always dangerous when it comes to Iraq's polyglot mixture of clans, tribes and religious factions, the reactions of the Sunni minority, where the current insurgency is strongest, will be key. If the Sunnis boycott, or participate in such limited numbers that they feel isolated and vulnerable in the new Iraq, their frustration

may boil over into an even more intense civil war, further taxing U.S., allied and Iraqi forces.

In the spring battles, the decision will go to the side with the most staying power. Assuming that the Iraqi government and its allies are still standing come summer, and that the government's present outreach to disaffected Baathists is moderately successful, there is a reasonable chance that homegrown Iraqi resistance to the new government will decline.

That does not, however, mean that the radical Islamic insurgency in Iraq will be over. Increasingly, foreign fighters are turning up in the battles in the Sunni triangle. Unless U.S. pressure succeeds in forcing Syria and Iran to close safe havens for Islamic infiltrators, radicals in increasing numbers are likely to continue slipping into Iraq to have their shots at the infidel invaders and their Iraqi supporters.

Two factors could undermine their long-term success.

First, Iraqis have shown a strong aversion to having foreigners in their midst -- particularly when the result is continued mayhem and destruction. Second, if the Iraqi security forces continue to grow in capability, by the summer and fall they should be battle-hardened enough to take on the foreigners with U.S. assistance in logistics, intelligence and firepower.

Regardless of who wins the springtime civil war, the insurgency could spread beyond Iraq. In the superheated passions of the current Middle East, when avenging Fallujah becomes a rallying cry for suicide-volunteers throughout the region, increased combat can be expected to incite even more foreign insurgents.

The greater danger, and one for which the United States must prepare, is that as this essentially shapeless insurgency spreads, it will also inevitably gain more comprehensive leadership with a more concrete strategic vision than the generalizations of the Quran.

There are anti-Western visionaries in the region who realize that the fanaticism that can bring an Abu al-Zarqawi to Fallujah can also be lifted from street tactics to an anti-Western strategy for the Middle East as a whole -- and perhaps globally. The historical trajectory is that discontent turns to terrorism, which becomes insurgency. Somewhere along the way, leaders emerge to manipulate the motivation of the discontented. Given time, an Islamic leader will inevitably arise to direct the passions of Islamic radicalism toward larger goals.

It is unlikely that Osama bin Laden would play that role; the mystic bin Laden has said many times that he is only a counselor or guide. He will play philosopher to someone else's Alexander.

The most logical source of leadership, openly or otherwise, would come from the Iranian mullahs who might be tempted to combine the geopolitical goal of a stable and pro-

Iranian regime in Baghdad with the opportunity to expand their theology throughout Arabia while striking a blow at the Great Satan -- the United States.

Given the nature of Iran's regime, support for an Islamic insurgency with growth potential next door would rise to the level of a holy duty and could be fairly low-risk, given the over-commitment of U.S. armed forces. Iranian support would greatly hearten insurgents in both Iraq and Afghanistan, provide geographic depth to insurgent planning, training and movement and give insurgent goals and grievances a state sponsor.

But Iran is not the only potential source of overarching goals and direction.

Given the prolonged and abrasive (to Islamic eyes) nature of today's war, tomorrow may see the emergence of a regional leader who can manipulate both religious fervor and political goals in ways that threaten the United States.

The transmutation of today's deadly but relatively uncoordinated Iraqi civil war into a coordinated and regional movement is the logical outcome of prolonged insurgency. The long-term challenge for U.S. policy, then, is not just to install democracy in an Iraq that has never known a free vote. The United States and its allies must also ensure that, in the aftermath of the battles to come in the spring, there is no opportunity or temptation for third parties to expand the insurgency beyond Iraq's borders or to provide safe havens for defeated fighters to rest, refit and polemicize to a regional audience.

Starting soon, and even as U.S. troops fight the tactical battles necessary to safeguard elections, American policy-makers should move in three areas:

* First, effective troop strength in Iraq, both American and Iraqi, must be bolstered. In the battle for Fallujah and elsewhere, U.S. troops were being moved around Iraq like fire brigades, putting out this fire and then that one. Though U.S. troop strength will rise during the election period, the administration is betting that the emerging Iraqi army and other security forces will soon be strong enough to make long-term deployment of additional U.S. forces unnecessary.

The pitfalls of such a strategy are obvious: Not only does it make the success of U.S. goals dependent on the performance of still-untested allied troops, but it leaves commanders in Iraq with no reserves on which to call when the violence escalates, as it will. Without reserves, commanders must make constant calls as to which fight is more important than others.

* Second, the United States and its new secretary of state must underwrite the creation of alliances focused specifically at preventing the dispersion of Iraqi insurgents into neighboring countries, and strongly discouraging the emergence of sympathetic or supportive leadership in the region. Iran, of course, is key. But so are Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and other places in the region where pro-insurgent sentiments run high.

The United States and its allies, both Middle Eastern and European, must make it clear that expressions of support, let alone active initiatives to succor insurgents, will be taken very seriously. Specifically, the United States will oppose with all means at its disposal the provision of support or sanctuaries to any individual insurgent, or groups of insurgents that flee the spring battles and seek shelter elsewhere in the region.

Additionally, the United States will sanction any attempt to exercise leadership or influence over fleeing insurgents, who must be treated as pariahs. With regard to Iran, we should continue to oppose the government in Tehran, and in particular its nuclear aspirations, and warn it specifically not to fish in the troubled waters to the west.

* Third, the United States must begin to take seriously the prospect of mobilizing armed forces well beyond those authorized today. We are trying to fight a guns-and-butter war - - a limited war that at bottom fails to recognize that our enemies, who may eventually have access to nuclear weapons, are committed to a war of unlimited scope and unlimited ambitions.

Recent legislation that expands the Army by 20,000 troops is a drop in the bucket -- an addition to a limited force, not a total commitment. Deterrence of Islamic adventurism -- the signal that we are prepared to take strong action if opportunistic third parties push to spread the insurgency to the region -- will require a much more emphatic expression of national will.

If the insurgency does spread, as it might, U.S. policy-makers and the armed forces will at least have begun to estimate the actual requirements of a trans-Mideast war rather than being caught flat-footed -- again -- by an enemy willing to raise the stakes. Girding for a wider war now offers both the opportunity to deter Islamic adventurism in the near future and the means to oppose it if deterrence fails.

The Duke of Wellington once said that a great nation cannot fight a small war. It is not a sure bet that the United States, the great nation of our times, can keep the war in Iraq small. The prudent course is for us to look to our powder while we can.

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