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THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?



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THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN MILITARY INTERVENTION

Roger Petersen

SINCE the end of the Cold War, the world's only superpower militarily intervened in a large number of conflicts. The most well-known cases include Operation Provide Comfort in Northern Iraq after the First Gulf War, Operation Gothic Serpent in Somalia, Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti, Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Operation Allied Force in Serbia/Kosovo, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 Iraq, Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya, and the intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This article considers the trajectory for U.S. military intervention for the near future. Many commentators hold that the failures of the Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya cases have effectively ended an era of large-scale U.S. military intervention. Others point to the entry of Susan Rice and Samantha Power into the Biden

Administration and expect the persistence of the use of the military in the vein of "liberal interventionism."

I will try to address this abstract question in a concrete manner by drawing out lessons from the 2003-2011 U.S. experience in Iraq. Among all of America's military adventures, the Iraq intervention was the costliest in terms of blood and treasure. The conflict was also exceedingly complex. In my present research on the Iraq conflict, I identify how the United States employed five different military strategies at different times and different places: warfighting, clear/hold/build, decapitation, community mobilization, and homogenization. Instead of making blanket statements about military intervention, we can better understand the trajectory of U.S. military intervention by examining the nature of success and failure of these particular strategies during 2003-11 in Iraq. Which of these

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Always at the ready

strategies have seen continuation in the ten years after U.S. withdrawal from Iraq? Which have become the basis for action moving forward? Which have truly been discarded?

WARFIGHTING.

As the term "warfighting" suggests, this strategy is about fighting a war—soldiers act to "kill the enemy, not to win their hearts and minds," in the words of Major Christopher Varhola, a U.S. Army Reserve civil affairs specialist summarizing the position of a commanding officer in the early days of the occupation of Iraq. The primary methods are firepower

and mobility. Obviously, an invasion uses these warfighting tools. However, many American practitioners continued to engage in warfighting against insurgents long after the invasion. They persisted in the use of armor, indirect artillery shelling, cordon and sweep operations, large scale detention, and displays of force as a deterrent.

In the form of invasion, America's warfighting success was stunning. U.S.-led armored forces took Baghdad in a matter of weeks; major combat operations lasted only 26 days; coalition casualties were minimal. The lesson learned from the First Iraq War was

reinforced: no force in the world can match the United States in mobility or firepower. In the form of counterinsurgency, on the other hand, warfighting left much to be desired. In contests where information is critical, armored “presence patrols” are essentially worthless. In struggles where legitimacy is important, collateral damage from indirect fire and large scale sweeps rounding up large numbers of detainees are detrimental. Fairly early in the war, many U.S. soldiers came to believe that warfighting alone was not likely to bring about a stable Iraq. Even before the dissemination of Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency (FM 24), first published in December 2006, officers in the field were moving to more nuanced counterinsurgency strategies in their localities.

If American soldiers learn, so do their opponents. Above all, they have learned not to provoke an invasion. The United States is so good at the conventional warfighting game that adversaries know not to play it. Opponents also know that while America has unchallenged military power, it also operates under heavy political constraints. Given these conditions, actors will engage in what David Kilcullen has termed “liminal maneuver”

as defined as “taking sufficiently few and ambiguous actions to achieve core political objectives, but not enough to trigger a military reaction.” Furthermore, if the U.S. were to invade and conduct warfighting, opponents around the world have also learned (not the least from the Iraq case) how to exploit that strategy’s shortcomings.

For the near future, the United States will be able to use its military superiority to “break things.” America can invade and overthrow governments if it wishes. This brings us to the famous “Pottery Barn” axiom of Colin Powell. In the discussion of the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq, Powell argued that the United States would inevitably become responsible for the consequences of that invasion. As in the policy of the Pottery Barn store: “you break it, you own it.” But what if that is not true? Looking back at the Iraq case, what if the United States “broke it,” removed Saddam Hussein and just left? The larger question is whether America can go around “breaking” its enemies through relatively cheap means and then leave.

Despite these theoretical musings, the bottom line is that unless international norms (and public opinion)

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CLEAR/HOLD/BUILD.

While warfighting is about breaking things, the counterinsurgency strategy of clear/hold/build focuses on building things. In December 2006, following the lead of General David Petraeus, the U.S. Army published FM 24, essentially a blueprint for the strategy. The strategy contains three interlocking tasks. First, insurgent sympathizers and neutrals must be moved into the role of government supporters. For the strategy to be successful individual citizens must be willing to provide information to the state-aligned forces about the actions and whereabouts of insurgents. While building support from the population, the counterinsurgent must recruit and train indigenous military forces. State forces must be able to use the information flowing from the population to hunt down and kill or capture mobile insurgent forces. As opposed to warfighting and other counterinsurgency strategies, clear/hold/build sees the general population as the Clausewitzian center of gravity. The most crucial step is creating supporters able and willing to provide information. This feature underlies the definitional core of the mission as “population-centric” and associates the strategy with “winning hearts and minds.”

In terms of resources, clear/hold/build is troop intensive. There must be a sufficient number of “boots on the ground” to “clear” insurgents from their strongholds. Then those troops must move out of large Forward Operating Bases to neighborhood Command Outposts to “hold” the area from a relapse into violence and “build” legitimate institutions. Success builds on success as the “oil spot” of stability spreads.

At a more general level, the “build” is about state-building. The strategy aims at accomplishing two ambitious tasks simultaneously. First, the creation of loyal citizens who will provide information and participate in governance. Second, the creation of loyal soldiers capable of protecting the citizenry. Following the work of Charles Tilly, the state forms from this “loyalty for security” dynamic. The only problem is that Tilly’s work outlines how this bargain evolved over decades or centuries in the West.

Nonetheless, the United States was intent on state-building in Iraq. Consider the words of both President George W. Bush, introducing the surge (with its underlying clear/hold/build strategy), and President Barack Obama announcing an American military wind-down.

First, to quote President Bush from a speech on 10 January 2007:

Victory will not look like the ones our fathers and grandfathers achieved. There will be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship. But victory in Iraq will bring something new in the Arab world: a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people. A democratic Iraq will not be perfect. But it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them, and it will help bring a future of peace and security for our children and grandchildren.

Next, to quote President Obama from a speech on 27 February 2009:

Today, I can announce that our review is complete, and that the United States will pursue a new strategy to end the war in Iraq through a transition to full Iraqi responsibility. This strategy is grounded in a clear and achievable goal shared by the Iraqi people and the American people: an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant. To achieve that goal, we will work to promote an Iraqi government that is just, representative, and accountable, and that provides neither support nor safe-haven to terrorists. We will help Iraq build new ties of trade and commerce with the world. And we will forge a partnership with the people and government of Iraq that contributes to the peace and security of the region.

Despite the rhetoric about freedom and democracy, at the core of these passages is the three-word phrase of Obama— “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant.” These are the attributes that define a functioning state. In the years following the American withdrawal in 2011, Iraq performed poorly on all three of these measures.

If sovereignty and stability have any meaning, it involves a measure of control over the territory of the state. The Iraqi state lost control of one-third of Iraq’s territory to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, not long after the American departure. Essentially, a relatively small militant religious group seized command of governing authority in Mosul, Ramadi, Tikrit, and other major Iraqi cities. The Iraq Army crumbled in the face of relatively small numbers of ISIS forces. Baghdad itself was threatened. For the first time in one hundred years, the supreme religious leader of Iraq’s Shia faithful issued a fatwa calling on individuals to mobilize in the face of a threat to the country. Non-state armed militias came to the defense of the Iraqi state.

Furthermore, the Iraqi state is not self-reliant. At the outset of the invasion in March 2003, major policymakers were not concerned with the Iraq state’s ability to fund itself. As often quoted, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told Congress that due

to its oil revenues “we’re really dealing with a country that could finance its own reconstruction.” Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld made similar claims at the time. The reality was that during 2003-2011, the United States spent approximately \$60 billion on reconstruction alone above and beyond war costs. In February 2018, in the wake of ISIS, donors pledged \$30 billion for reconstruction, a number far short of the \$88 billion that Iraqi leaders were seeking. Iraq managed a per capita GDP of less than \$10,000 in 2017. In the intervening period, those numbers have not changed significantly. The government and economy suffer from major corruption. In January 2021, Transparency International ranked Iraq 160th out of 179 states on its Corruption Perception Index. Moreover, with nearly 47 percent of the population under the age of 20, the “youth bulge” will likely make matters worse.

Robert Gates famously told an Assembly of Army cadets back in February 2011, “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined.’” No doubt, American policymakers in 2021 likely concur with Gates. For many, the Iraq case shows that “nation-building is impossible” and that military interventions are not worth the effort

and usually turn into “endless wars.” Moreover, the problem in Iraq was not just that America could not achieve the lofty goals of democracy; rather, the United States, despite tens of billions of dollars spent and the work of thousands of trainers, could not build a functioning Iraqi Army, an essential part of the clear/hold/build strategy.

The Iraq case points out something broader than simply an American failure to rebuild a strong and well-functioning Iraqi state. The very nature of the Iraq state that has developed is also telling. Even though Iraq is a very weak state, it does manage to govern itself. In fact, it has managed to make some progress in terms of democratization. In its 2021 evaluations, Freedom House gives Iraq a 29/100 score. Here are the scores of other states in the region: Syria 1, Jordan 34, West Bank 25, Lebanon 43, Iran 16, Saudi Arabia 7, Yemen 11, Oman 23, UAE 17, Qatar 25. By regional standards, Iraq is above average and the report indicates it “holds regular, competitive elections.” In a sense, one could say that it qualifies as an “electoral democracy”—a term that Freedom House used in the recent past to describe the country.

Iraq has managed to achieve some level of resiliency, but it has done so through sectarian bargaining, reliance for security on non-state actors including militias taking orders from Iran,

and the social services practice of religious organizations. In short, Iraq had taken on many of the characteristics of Lebanon. That is not what American interveners had envisioned when they set off on their state-building mission.

The broader problem for Western state-building projects is that for much of the world, states are no longer states in the Weberian sense. States increasingly lack control of the legitimate means of violence and the means to project centralized

power. Correspondingly, Western interveners may not wish to launch state-building strategies in an environment they cannot predict, shape, or fully understand.

Perhaps the biggest reason we will not see the Iraqi surge model of clear/hold/build again is that we saw it not just once, but twice. In February 2009, President Obama ordered a surge in Afghanistan sending 17,000 more troops to the 32,000 U.S. forces and 38,000 NATO personnel already there. As with the Iraqi surge, the change involved not only more troops but also a move to a population-centric strategy seen in Iraq's clear/hold/build. The consensus view is that the move failed to reach its objectives in Afghanistan as well.

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Even if liberal interventionists continue to hold power in Democratic Party controlled administrations—even if the Responsibility-to-Protect (R2P) lobby sustains its presence—we are unlikely to see military-led troop intensive state-

building projects like clear/hold/build in the foreseeable future.

DECAPITATION

For those who would give up on state-building interventions, decapitation offers an alternative. I want to underline that I use

the term “decapitation” loosely here to describe targeted raids against both broader mid-level network leadership (often described as counter-network operations) and smaller numbers of killings of senior leaders (usually termed decapitation and sometimes assassination). Decapitation calls for going after insurgent organizations directly by enhancing the acuity and coverage of surveillance and the speed and precision of strike forces.

When manhunts are coupled together such that intelligence from detainees and materials gathered from one raid provides leads for new raids, then decapitation efforts are often called “counter-network operations” or simply “counterterrorism.” U.S. Special Operations Forces describes this cyclic

methodology as “find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze” (F3EA). Whereas “clear, hold, build” attempts to address grievance as the root cause of insurgency, F3EA aims to liquidate the clandestine organizations that insurgency requires, whatever its cause. The population's hearts and minds and its factions are not major concerns. Nor is the provision of goods to the population a part of the equation. The strategy's goal is simply to kill or capture senior and mid-level insurgent commanders faster than they are able to regenerate in order to sow fear and confusion and ultimately to cause the network to collapse.

Both decapitation and warfighting wish to use military means to go after mobile insurgents. The differences between the two strategies are large though. Decapitation is selective violence; it tries to avoid interacting with the population much at all by seeking reliable intelligence to trigger a raid and by keeping a discrete footprint. In some ways, the strategy is the polar opposite of warfighting with its highly visible and indiscriminate tactics of “cordon and search,” “harassment and interdiction” bombing, and “search and destroy.”

The primary “executioners” who conduct decapitation can be found in the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). JSOC was officially formed shortly after the attempted hostage

rescue disaster of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran during the Carter Administration. It draws from the military's most elite units—75th Army Rangers, Delta Force, and SEAL Team 6. The original intent was to create an elite force that would report directly to the president. As described by General Hugh Shelton, JSOC was meant to be “the ace in the hole. If you were a card player, that's your ace that you've got tucked away.” In the 1990's, JSOC pursued war criminals in the former Yugoslavia and targeted members of the emerging al Qaeda organization. It also set up shop in the 1990's in Iraqi Kurdistan with Task Force 20. After 9/11, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld greatly expanded JSOC's mission and, correspondingly, JSOC's capabilities. In September 2003, Stanley McChrystal became JSOC Commander for the next five years. With Iraq's most wanted portrayed on a deck of cards, McChrystal and JSOC went to work. As insurgent networks proliferated, the target set expanded exponentially.

As mentioned above, counterterrorism operations run on a cycle represented by F3EA. With experience under its belt, JSOC dramatically increased the speed of this cycle. Once a target was found, drones helped fix that target's location. Combat teams finished the target (capturing or killing) but now specialists accompanied the combat team and immediately exploited the

information found on laptops, flash drives, and cell phones. With ever expanding data, a rapid analysis of the new information created the abilities to immediately seek new targets. The cycle was reduced from days to hours.

These capabilities expanded again during the war against ISIS. Starting in full force in September 2014, U.S. operations against ISIS exhibited truly astounding technical capabilities. Multiple digitally streamed video from drone feeds fill screens at strike centers. Infrared technology heightens targeting specificity. Information funneled through multiple sources makes it way to Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC). The JTAC, in conjunction with Collateral Damage Analysts, chooses among a menu of strike options including laser guided 300-pound Maverick missiles, F/A18 500 pound bombs, AC-130 30mm cannon fire, Predator drone 100-pound Hellfire missiles. There are selectable fuse options for some munitions that allow a choice between contact blast or air blast.

In the war against ISIS, U.S. forces made thousands of strikes that killed up to 300 ISIS fighters a week. These same

capabilities could be used in a more precise way as seen in the assassination of Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020. There is little doubt that decapitation will remain a major part of American strategy, both in counter-terrorism and

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in counterinsurgency. Among possible strategies, decapitation is the cheapest in cost and manpower and the least intrusive in terms of a "footprint." Operations are carried out either by unmanned drone strike or by small groups of Special Forces in precisely targeted raids. Even if one thinks the benefits of the strategy are not that high, at least the costs appear very low. President Obama did not hesitate to use decapitation.

While decapitation is likely to play a role in future U.S. military interventions, its more exact future is not clear. The ISIS war suggests a range of possibilities, some expansive. As mentioned above, despite massive U.S. training and investment, the Iraqi regular army exhibited neither professionalism nor patriotism when confronted by ISIS. In the ISIS war, the United States did find professional partners in the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service and some Peshmerga units. This experience

suggests that America could downplay military-military relationships with partners around the world and instead build close relationships between U.S. special forces and partner state special forces. The U.S. military could select and train these partner special forces to act as the eyes and ears for American decapitation.

The Israelis have a phrase for the constant killing of militant opponents: "mowing the lawn." Due to the nature of Israel's region, militants and terrorists are as inevitable as grass growing in the front yard. All a state can do is develop a machinery to cut the grass, a lawn mower so to speak. In a similar fashion, the United States could forego state-building, develop relationships with special forces communities in allied states around the world, and engage in "lawn-mowing" on a global scale. The Iraq wars showed that America has a machine to do so. For some, the business of the United States—given what has been learned from the Iraq and Afghanistan examples—is counterterrorism, not state-building. Putting the results of Iraq in context, all the United States should hope for is short-term successes, and decapitation is the most cost-efficient way to accomplish them.

There are questions of efficacy, legality, and morality. Decapitating leaders of established organizations often has

limited effects. For example, U.S. forces killed the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, al-Zarqawi, in June 2006. Yet, AQI still thrived. By this point AQI was built to survive decapitation. In Weberian terms, the charismatic founder of AQI created a formal-rational organization that was able to replace him with new charismatic leaders. There is also the issue of collateral damage, although some argue that the incredible precision of current weapons, combined with oversight by legal teams, has confronted this problem.

There is also the gut emotional reaction to making decapitation central to U.S. military intervention. One Joint Terminal Attack Controller operating in the third Iraq war described his reaction after a strike:

The smoke slowly cleared in light winds. Soon we distinguished bodies strewn all over the west side of the berm—some with limbs separated and others in contorted positions. Those were always solemn moments, but ones we were conditioned to appreciate as warfighters battling a blood-thirsty enemy. As strange as it may seem to some, for guys like us it was a scene of somber beauty to see our enemy cut down and lying in pieces on the ground in front of us.

Whether the world can become "conditioned" to appreciate this style of military intervention is an open question.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

With community mobilization, the counterinsurgent interacts with groups of individuals who have been knit together through networks, family ties, or organizational history. The goal is to bring whole collectives into supportive roles both in terms of intelligence provision and as a source of manpower for the police and security organs. The strategy can also involve “flipping” an entire community-based militia from support of the insurgent over to support of the state.

While clear/hold/build stresses the importance of regular engagement with local elites, the role of those local elites is limited. Community mobilization, on the other hand, calls for basically allying with local elites and bringing in their organizations intact. Although there may be plans to break up or integrate these organizations into the state, the strategy simply calls for making a deal to bring the support of the organization over to the counterinsurgent’s side. Clear/hold/build does not see such alliances as the way forward, especially in terms of state-building. Accordingly, as outlined in FM 3-24, irregular units always pose a potential threat. As the Field Manual concludes: “If militias are outside the [host nation] government’s control, they can often be obstacles to ending an insurgency.”

Despite the objections in the U.S. field manual, the American experience in Iraq provides a paradigmatic case of community mobilization with the “flipping” of Bedouin tribes from cooperation with AQI to alliance with the United States. This alliance produced a dramatic drop in violence in the region. In September of 2006, violence in Anbar peaked at nearly 2000 incidents a month, more than in any other province in Iraq. Remarkably, the rate plunged to just 155 incidents in January 2008, as reported by Anthony H. Cordesman in a Center for Strategic and International Studies. One of the most violent provinces had become the most peaceful. The local tribes became indignant over the brutal extremism and economic usurpation of AQI and also found themselves in an ever declining strategic position vis-à-vis ascendant Shia factions. Their decision to cooperate with the U.S. military provided intelligence and manpower to defeat AQI. The American victory over AQI occurred first in al-Qaim on the Syrian border in late 2005, then in Ramadi in late 2006, in Fallujah in early 2007. The success in Anbar led to Sons of Iraq alliances being formed throughout much of Iraq.

Whether the strategy produces long-term success is more questionable. Many U.S. practitioners envisioned community mobilization as a way to fold Anbar’s Sunni tribesmen into the

security system of the Iraqi state. While community mobilization empowered tribes in the short run, the Maliki regime did little to integrate significant numbers into the Army and other state security organizations. After the withdrawal of the United States in 2011, Sunni relations with the Maliki controlled Iraq state soured. Protests led to violence. With the situation in Sunni majority areas festering like an old sore, many tribes allied with ISIS when they swept into Anbar.

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Community mobilization allows groups to retain autonomy. However, that autonomy means that “flipped” groups can “flip” back to oppose the state. These groups can work both sides changing back and forth and always looking for a better deal. Furthermore, even if the group does not completely “flip” into opposition, these non-state organizations will have incentives to seek their own goals rather than the state’s. They may be allying with the state to protect revenue streams gained from smuggling or criminal or semi-criminal practices.

Whereas FM 3-24 assumes that the solution to civil war anarchy is a Weberian monopoly of violence invested in the state, the community mobilization

strategy may give rise to a stable truce among an oligopoly of feudal warlords (or party bosses, mafia dons, tribal patriarchs, or whatever the polite term might be). How and whether these can be consolidated into the central state is

a major research area in comparative politics, but historically the process has been both lengthy and violent.

The United States continued to play forms of the community mobilization strategy in Syria even if they did not openly admit doing

so. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces are less “democratic” and more a collection of community/ethnic groups dominated by the Kurdish Peoples Protection Group (YPG). As could be expected, the agendas of these community-based proxy groups differed from their American sponsor.

The United States is likely to continue practicing forms of community mobilization in the near future, but the nature of this game is usually opportunistic and ad hoc. In Iraq, it was the tribes that approached the United States to make a deal after interests changed and aligned. In Syria, the United States was looking for on-the-ground short-term partners to help eliminate ISIS. In practice, community mobilization often has

idiosyncratic origins and unpredictable trajectories. It is unlikely to be the basis of consistent American policy.

HOMOGENIZATION

When ethnic war breaks out in a state with highly mixed populations, political scientists like

Chaim Kaufmann argue that the best way to end ethnic violence is to allow, or even encourage, physical separation of the warring sides. With interspersed populations, the dynamics of the security dilemma can come into play—

In the absence of American will to military intervene, homogenization may become an unstated policy in many of the world's most violent ethnic conflicts.

one side can quickly attack the other, there is little way to distinguish defensive preparations from offensive ones, there can be an urgency to quickly attack to rescue pockets of vulnerable co-ethnics. However, if all co-ethnics can demographically concentrate behind a defensible boundary, the opposing sides can both effectively shield themselves from attack and signal defensive intentions. If the ability for quick and easy strikes are eliminated, incentives to engage in ceasefires and negotiations appear.

There are good examples where ethnic homogenization led to a decrease in violence. Consider the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-1995. Ethnic separation during the war had

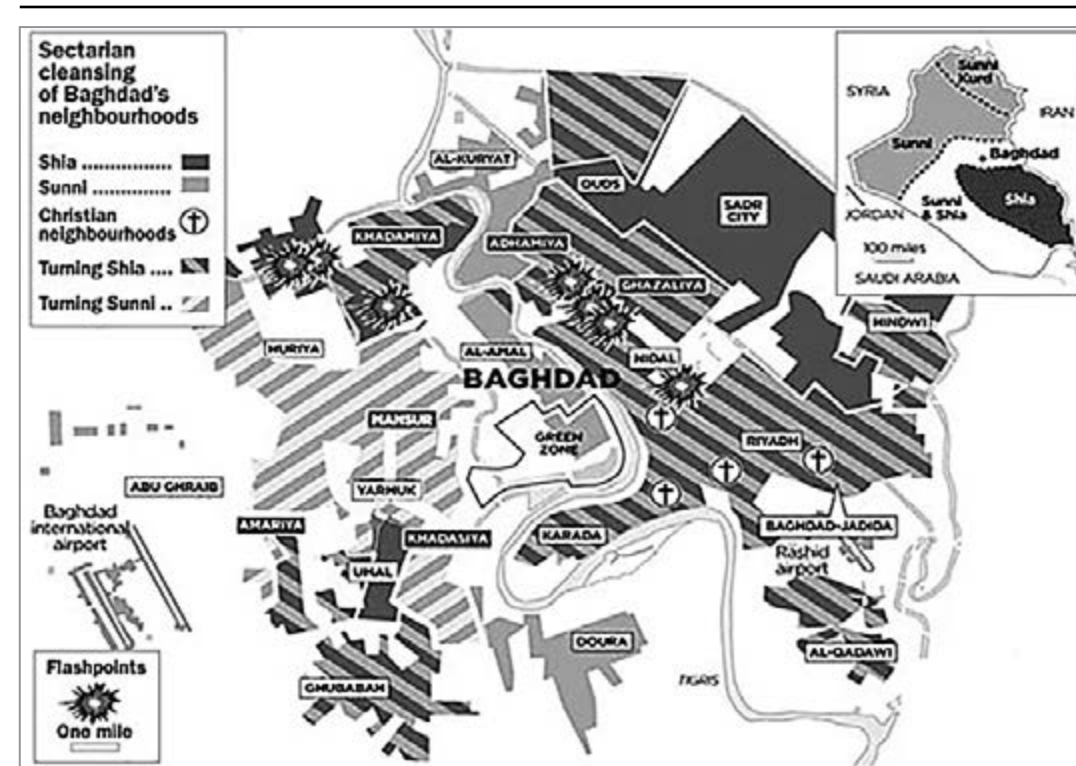
drastically reduced the number of demographically mixed, contestable, and potentially violent hot spots. At the end of the war, the non-Serb population living in Republika Srpska fell from a pre-war 46 percent to 3 percent. Likewise, the Serbian population in the territory of the Federation had fallen

from 17 percent to 3 percent. Without this separation, the Dayton Accords may not have been possible.

The civil war in Iraq during 2005-2007 witnessed a similar separation among

Sunni and Shia in Baghdad. Consider the U.S. military map from this period illustrating Baghdad's sectarian cleansing. Given that this is a military map, the U.S. military was obviously aware of the homogenization of Baghdad and aware of the "flashpoints of violence" marked on the map.

Consciously or not, U.S. forces constructed concrete T-walls that reinforced the new ethnic demographic lines. In effect, although the U.S. military could not stop the homogenization process, it did facilitate the creation and continuation of homogenous neighborhoods. In the debate about the causes of the dramatic decline in violence in Baghdad, one of the major points of contention is the causal role



A U.S. military map circa 2005-2007 illustrating Baghdad's sectarian cleansing

Photo: USG as supplied by the author

of homogenization. Because sectarian cleansing and the surge (as well as community mobilization and JSOC's decapitation for that matter) took place at roughly the same time, it is difficult to separate out their respective effects.

Governments and occupying forces do not usually choose ethnic homogenization as a strategy; it is normatively too close to ethnic cleansing. Governments may turn a blind eye to the process, or they may work with the result of ethnic cleansing to maintain peace. On the basis of interviews I conducted in the region a few years ago, many in

the Middle East believe that the United States allowed homogenization of warring communities in Syria.

In the absence of American will to military intervene, homogenization may become an unstated policy in many of the world's most violent ethnic conflicts.

THE FUTURE

The U.S. intervention and war in Iraq has been the most important conflict of the twenty-first century so far, but it will almost certainly not be the last U.S. military intervention.

Members of the U.S. military may want to get out of the post-war reconstruction business and emphasize kinetic warfighting and deterrence operations but given their experience and resources they are unlikely to be able to extract themselves from the increasingly complicated nature of violent conflicts in today's world.

What has the exercise here, based on examination of American practice in Iraq and the following period, suggested about the near and medium term future?

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(counter-network operations) in the Middle East and Africa.

Then there is the form of decapitation that

Venezuela have moved American policymakers toward serious consideration of large scale military intervention.

Third, there will almost certainly be a role for decapitation. The technology, as seen at work in Iraq, is too seductive. The United States, perhaps relying on transnational relationships among special forces, will likely use decapitation to erode insurgent organizations

targets only the very top leadership. The shadow of the 2011 NATO Operation Unified Protector in Libya remains as a powerful cautionary tale for that strategy. Although NATO denied it was employing a decapitation strategy, the bombing campaign clearly targeted command and control centers and Qaddafi personally. The head of the snake was indeed cut off. In the famous words of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "we came, we saw, he died." But the decapitation of Qaddafi and the deaths and defections of his leading generals was followed by political and social chaos, the murder of the U.S. Ambassador, and the rise of Islamist militants. President Obama summarized the progression of events as a "shit show." A 2014 RAND report written by Christopher Chivvis and Jeffery Martini

estimated that a stabilization force of only 13,000 troops could have changed the course of events, but in the wake of Iraq the Western powers were in no mood for even this relatively low level of deployment. R2P advocates originally hailed the multinational UN-sanctioned military intervention in Libya as a low cost and effective model for future humanitarian interventions. In the longer term, Libya became a symbol of humanitarian hubris and wishful thinking.

Fourth, there is no end in sight for opportunistic community mobilization. If the United States is involved in a conflict, why not take advantage of able and armed communities ready to provide manpower and intelligence to complement American firepower and organization? The Iraq experience has shown, however, that these short term military synergies are not always compatible with longer term political goals.

Fifth, given the overall reticence to engage in large scale military intervention,

we can expect the United States, and the Western powers as a whole, to allow more and more conflicts to burn on. Some of these conflicts will produce homogenization, defensible boundaries between warring groups,

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and eventual hurting stalemates. In these cases, the international community may step in to negotiate peace. In other cases, as in Syria, the war will rage on spewing death until one side gains victory.

The Iraq war was traumatic. Few wish to think about it. Most wish to dismiss the conflict with predictable general statements. But

the Iraq case presents us with incredible fields of variation in violence, state-building, U.S. strategies, and opponent counterstrategies. This article has drawn on some of that variation to understand the possible future trajectory of U.S. military intervention. No doubt some of these conclusions will be wrong, but hopefully they do some justice to the sacrifice and suffering of both civilians and soldiers witnessed during the U.S. intervention in Iraq. ●