The wrong war back draft: how the war in Iraq has Fueled Al Qaeda and ignited its dream of global Jihad

By Peter Bergen.

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President Bush's May 2003 announcement aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln that "major combat operations" had ended in Iraq has been replayed endlessly. What is less well remembered is just what the president claimed the United States had accomplished. "The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001," he declared. The defeat of Saddam Hussein, he told the American people, was "a crucial advance in the campaign against terror." In fact, the consensus now emerging among a wide range of intelligence and counter-terrorism professionals is that the opposite is true: The invasion of Iraq not only failed to help the war on terrorism, but it represented a substantial setback.

In more than a dozen interviews, experts both within and outside the U.S. government laid out a stark analysis of how the war has hampered the campaign against Al Qaeda. Not only, they point out, did the war divert resources and attention away from Afghanistan, seriously damaging the prospects of capturing Al Qaeda leaders, but it has also opened a new front for terrorists in Iraq and created a new justification for attacking Westerners around the world. Perhaps most important, it has dramatically speeded up the process by which Al Qaeda the organization has morphed into a broad-based ideological movement -- a shift, in effect, from bin Laden to bin Ladenism. "If Osama believed in Christmas, this is what he'd want under his Christmas tree," one senior intelligence official told me. Another counter-terrorism official suggests that Iraq might begin to resemble "Afghanistan 1996," a reference to the year that bin Laden seized on Afghanistan, a chaotic failed state! as his new base of operations.

Even Kenneth Pollack, one of the nation's leading experts on Iraq, whose book The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq made the most authoritative case for overthrowing Saddam Hussein, says, "My instinct tells me that the Iraq war has hindered the war on terrorism. You had to deal with Al Qaeda first, not Saddam. We had not crippled the Al Qaeda organization when we embarked on the Iraq war."

The damage to U.S. interests is hard to overestimate. Rohan Gunaratna, a Sri Lankan academic who is regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on Al Qaeda, points out that "sadness and anger about Iraq, even among moderate Muslims, is being harnessed and exploited by terrorist and extremist groups worldwide to grow in strength, size, and influence." Similarly, Vincent Cannistraro, a former chief of counter-terrorism at the CIA under presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush, says the Iraq war "accelerated terrorism" by "metastasizing" Al Qaeda. Today, Al Qaeda is more than the narrowly defined group that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001; it is a growing global movement that has been energized by the war in Iraq.

This turn of events is a dramatic shift from the mood in the months following the 9/11 attacks. When the United States went to war against the Taliban, it was understood by many in the global community, including many Arabs and Muslims, as a just war. The war in Iraq not only drained that reservoir of goodwill; it also dragged the United States into what many see as a conflict with the Muslim world, or ummah, in general. Samer Shehata, a professor of Arab politics at Georgetown University, says the Iraq war has convinced "many Muslims around the world, perhaps a majority, that the war on terrorism is in fact a war against Islam." Jason Burke, author of the authoritative 2003 book Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror, adds that the Iraq war "appears to be clear evidence to many that the perception of the militants is in fact accurate and that the ummah is engaged in a war of self-defense. This has theological implications -- jihad is compulsory for all Muslims! if the ummah is under attack."

This is not an arcane matter of Islamic jurisprudence, but a key reason why Americans are now dying in significant numbers in Iraq and an important factor behind the rise of a revitalized Al Qaeda movement. The Koran has two sets of justifications for holy war; one concerns a "defensive" jihad, when a Muslim land is under attack by non-Muslims, while the other countenances offensive attacks on infidels. Generally, Muslims consider the defensive justification for jihad to be the more legitimate. It was, for instance, a defensive jihad that clerics invoked against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s.
To the extent that Sunni Muslims -- the vast majority of Muslims -- have a Vatican, it is Al Azhar University in Cairo, the pre-eminent center of Muslim thought. Before the Iraq war, Al Azhar released a fatwa, a ruling on Islamic law, to the effect that if "crusader" forces attacked Iraq, it was an obligation for every Muslim to fight back. The clerics of Al Azhar were not alone in this view. The prominent Lebanese Shiite scholar Sheikh Fadlullah also called on Muslims to fight American forces in Iraq. In contrast, after 9/11, Sheikh Fadlullah had issued a fatwa condemning the attacks, as did the chief cleric of Al Azhar. Throughout the Muslim world, leading clerics who condemned what happened on 9/11 have given their blessing to fighting against the occupation of Iraq -- and as demonstrated by the attacks in Madrid in March, jihadists are prepared to take that fight to the invaders' home turf.

Harry "Skip" Brandon, a former senior counter terrorism official at the FBI, says the Iraq war "serves as a real rallying point, not only for the region, but also in Asia. We've seen very solid examples of them using the Iraq war for recruiting. I have seen it personally in Malaysia. The Iraq war is a public relations bonanza for Al Qaeda and a public relations disaster for us the longer it goes on." Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's prediction that the occupation of Iraq would create "a hundred bin Ladens" is beginning to look prescient. We may soon find ourselves facing something akin to a global intifada.

Perhaps the most emblematic failure of the war on terrorism has been the continued ability of Al Qaeda's top leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, to set the agenda for a string of terrorist attacks around the world. A bin Laden call for attacks against Western economic interests in October 2002 was followed by bombings of a French oil tanker and a Bali disco catering to Western tourists. In September 2003, Zawahiri denounced Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf for supporting the U.S. campaign against Al Qaeda; Musharraf narrowly survived two assassination attempts over the months that followed. And after bin Laden called for retaliation against countries that were part of the coalition in Iraq in late 2003, terrorists attacked an Italian police barracks in Iraq, a British consulate in Turkey, and commuter trains in Madrid. According to a May report by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, Al Qaeda is now "fully reconstituted," with a "new and effective modus operandi," a presence in as many as 90 countries, and "over 18,000 potential terrorists still at large."

Yet despite Al Qaeda's undiminished global influence, the United States has pulled vital resources away from the hunt for bin Laden and Zawahiri. Soon after the fall of the Taliban, substantial numbers of Arabic speakers at the CIA and the National Security Agency were directed to focus on Iraq rather than the hunt for Al Qaeda. "By January 2002, serious planning began for the invasion of Iraq," notes Cannistraro, the former CIA counter terrorism chief, "and that meant drawing down Arabic language resources from CIA and electronic intelligence gathering." In addition, says Richard Clarke, who headed counter terrorism efforts under both presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, unmanned Predator spy planes were deployed away from Afghanistan to Iraq in March 2003, and satellites surveying the Afghan-Pakistani border were diverted to the Gulf region.

Special Operations soldiers with critical skills -- including Arabic language training -- were perhaps the U.S. military's key assets in the effort to capture Al Qaeda leaders. But according to Larry Johnson, who used to work on counterterrorism issues at the CIA and State Department and who now advises the U.S. military on terrorism, those forces were pulled out of Afghanistan in the spring of 2002 to look for Scud missiles in western Iraq. It was only following the capture of Saddam Hussein, last December, that those troops were directed back to searching for Al Qaeda, leaving the pursuit of Al Qaeda's leaders significantly impaired for a year and a half.

Today, the hunt for Al Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan is largely a waiting game. Last summer, when I went out with a platoon from the 82nd Airborne on a mission into the badlands along the Afghan border to look for Al Qaeda and other "anti-coalition" forces, I found that the three-day mission did little more than chase shadows. Sergeant Joe Frost, a demolitions expert in his mid-30s, summed it up by noting that U.S. troops often found themselves attacked after sundown but could rarely find their assailants: "They're like shoot and run. We've seen one Al Qaeda person in the last six months." And therein lies the cru of the problem: The United States did not effectively crush Al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan during the war and its aftermath, meaning
that those forces were able to slip away into the border region, where they can hide and organize attacks both inside Afghanistan and around the world.

Today, only 20,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Afghanistan, a country the size of Texas and nearly 50 percent larger than Iraq, where 140,000 U.S. troops haven't been enough to create stability. Kathy Gannon, who has covered Afghanistan for the past 16 years for the Associated Press, says that the security situation is "as bad as it's ever been" -- and that includes the years during and before the Taliban reign. The power of regional warlords has surged, challenging Hamid Karzai's central government and creating space for the Taliban to quietly emerge from the shadows. Taliban leader Mullah Omar and military commander Jalaluddin Haqqani both remain at large, as does Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pashtun warlord whose forces are regularly engaging U.S. soldiers. Meanwhile, Afghanistan has become the world's largest source of opium, the raw material for heroin. The country is now one of the world's leading narco-states, and money from the $2.3 billion drug trade is reportedly making its way into Al Qaeda's coffers. According to Barnett Rubin, a senior fellow at New York University and an authority on the region, Afghanistan is "obviously in danger of reverting to a failed state."

But the administration's focus on the war in Iraq has not only caused it to shortchange the hunt for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan -- it has also undermined the war on terrorism around the world. A poll taken by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in March 2004 found that bin Laden is viewed favorably by large parts of the population in Pakistan (65 percent), Jordan (55 percent), and Morocco (45 percent), all countries that are key allies in the war on terrorism. These results echo those of a Pew survey taken shortly after the invasion of Iraq in which Indonesians, Jordanians, Turks, and Moroccans all expressed more "confidence" in bin Laden than in President Bush. During the buildup to the war, the polling company Zogby International found that favorable views of the United States had declined from 34 to 10 percent in Jordan, 38 to 9 percent in Morocco, and 12 to 3 percent in Saudi Arabia. Of course, admiration for bin Laden and dislike for the United States do not necessarily translate into a desire to attack Westerners. But the war against bin Laden is in large part a war of ideas -- and on that front, the war in Iraq has damaged the United States' cause and broadened the pool of Al Qaeda recruits.

Nowhere is this shift more visible than on the Internet -- a significant fact in itself, since Internet chatter reflects the opinions of a relatively educated, elite segment of the Muslim world. To the extent that Al Qaeda -- "the base" in Arabic -- has a new base, it is, to a surprising degree, on the web. According to a U.S. government contractor who specializes in analyzing jihadist chat rooms and websites, web traffic was "tremendously energized" in the period before the Iraq war. "When it was clear that the war was about to occur, there was more participation, more rhetoric, more anger," the contractor says. "The war in Afghanistan provoked some anger, but not as much as the Iraq war." And while such chatter often amounts to mere venting, online discussions can also generate a road map for terrorist acts. Veteran Middle East reporter Paul Eedle, who closely monitors Arabic language websites, points to a document posted on an Al Qaeda site in December 2003! "reflecting the thinking of senior Al Qaeda leaders" that discussed how best to break up the coalition in Iraq. The document noted that countries like the United Kingdom were unlikely to withdraw from Iraq, while Spain was the weakest link in the coalition. Three months later, 191 Spaniards lost their lives in a bombing timed to coincide with Spain's election, and Spain subsequently withdrew its troops from Iraq. Another shift in Internet traffic came this spring, when visits to websites with information about Iraq -- such as Al Jazeera's home page -- skyrocketed during the standoff in Fallujah and the prison abuse scandal. "Iraq has become transformed beyond a cause that energized just the jihadists," Eedle says. "It has caused outrage at every middle-class dinner table in the Middle East."

Saddam Hussein's Iraq -- despite the administration's arguments to the contrary -- was hardly a haven for Al Qaeda. But now, Iraq has become what some experts call a "super magnet" for jihadists. "We've created the World Series of terrorism," a senior government counter terrorism official told me.

Judith Yaphe, who was the CIA's senior analyst on Iraq during the first Gulf War, says Iraq is "open to terrorism in a way that it was not before. The lack of central authority makes it more amenable to terrorists." Iraq is convenient for Arab militants, who can blend into its society in a way they did not in Bosnia, Chechnya, or Afghanistan. Dr. Saad al-Fagih, a leading Saudi dissident, says that hundreds of Saudis have gone to fight in Iraq; one source of his, he says, compares Iraq to "Peshawar during the 1980s,"
a reference to the Pakistani city that attracted Muslims from around the world seeking to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Given that large numbers of U.S. forces are likely to be in Iraq for years, it is clear that the country will remain an important theater of operations for Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The irony of this development hardly needs to be stated. A key reason the Bush administration was able to sell the Iraq war to the American people was the widely held belief that Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime had entered into an unholy alliance and were jointly responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon -- something 2 out of 3 Americans believed, according to a Pew poll released in October 2002. To date, the largest criminal investigation in history has turned up no evidence of Iraq's involvement in 9/11; nor have the occupation of Iraq and the efforts of the entire U.S. intelligence apparatus uncovered any such link. Yet Al Qaeda-like groups, both homegrown and foreign, have now become well established in Iraq. "Prior to 2003 and our invasion, Iraq rarely figured on the international terrorism charts," notes Larry Johnson, the military adviser. "Now Iraq has had the third-largest number of terrorist fatalities after Israel and India."

Some U.S. officials have argued that this development may have an upside: In July 2003, General Ricardo Sanchez offered what has been dubbed the "flypaper" theory, explaining that Iraq "is what I would call a terrorist magnet.... And this will prevent the American people from having to go through attacks back in the United States." But this is an absurd ex post facto rationalization: Before the war, the Bush administration would hardly have made the case that we were going to occupy Iraq so that our men and women in uniform would attract terrorists eager to kill them.

Nor has the Iraqi "flypaper" served to stop jihadists from attacking elsewhere. Over the past year, more than 100 people have died in attacks against Western and Jewish targets in Turkey and Morocco; car bombs in Saudi Arabia have killed scores more; a suicide attacker in August 2003 bombed a Marriott hotel in Indonesia, killing 12; and the train bombs in Madrid left 191 people dead. And these numbers do not take into account the thousands of people who have been killed in the past year in insurgencies in places such as Kashmir, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia -- all conflicts in which the broader Al Qaeda movement plays a significant role.

Which brings us to an important question: What is Al Qaeda? The network is perhaps best understood as a set of concentric rings, growing more ill defined as they spread outward. At the core is Al Qaeda the organization, which bin Laden and a dozen or so close associates formed in 1989, and which eventually expanded to 200 to 300 core members who have sworn an oath of allegiance to bin Laden, their emir, or prince. It was Al Qaeda the organization that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001.

The second concentric ring consists of perhaps several thousand men who have trained in Al Qaeda's Afghan camps in bomb making, assassination, and the manufacture of poisons. Beyond that ring are as many as 120,000 who received some kind of basic military training in Afghanistan over the past decade. An undetermined number of those fighters are now sharpening their skills as insurgents from Kashmir to Algeria.

The Madrid attacks in March are emblematic of what is emerging as the fourth and perhaps most ambiguous -- and potentially most dangerous -- ring in the Al Qaeda galaxy. The attacks were carried out by a group of Moroccans with few links to Al Qaeda the organization. Some of the conspirators did try to establish direct contact with the inner core of Al Qaeda, but that effort seems to have been unsuccessful, and they carried out the attacks under their own steam. These attacks may well represent the future of "Al Qaeda" operations, most of which will be executed by local jihadists who have little or no direct connection to bin Laden's group. This is a worrisome development, because it suggests that Al Qaeda has successfully transformed itself from an organization into a mass movement with a nearly unlimited pool of potential operatives.

Even administration officials now seem to acknowledge that the war has not lessened the likelihood of attacks inside the United States. As CIA Director George Tenet testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee in February, Al Qaeda detainees "consistently talk about the importance the group still attaches to striking the main enemy, the United States.... Even catastrophic attacks on the scale of September 11
remain within Al Qaeda's reach." Senior counter-terrorism officials are especially concerned about possible attacks timed to the Republican convention in New York and about attacks aimed to disrupt the November election.

If the Al Qaeda leadership had been wiped out in Afghanistan during the winter of 2001, President Bush might have gone down in history as one of the more adroit wartime presidents. Instead, Al Qaeda's leaders and many of its foot soldiers went on to fight another day. Making matters worse, the president volunteered the nation for a counterproductive war in Iraq that has cost us dearly in blood and treasure. Few mourn the defeat of Saddam, a tyrant who will surely join Stalin, Pol Pot, and Hitler in some especially unpleasant corner of hell. However, the war against Saddam wasn't conducted under the banner of liberating the Iraqi people, but rather under the banner of winning the war on terrorism. And by that standard, it has been a grotesque failure.

What we have done in Iraq is what bin Laden could not have hoped for in his wildest dreams: We invaded an oil-rich Muslim nation in the heart of the Middle East, the very type of imperial adventure that bin Laden has long predicted was the United States' long-term goal in the region. We deposed the secular socialist Saddam, whom bin Laden has long despised, ignited Sunni and Shia fundamentalist fervor in Iraq, and have now provoked a "defensive" jihad that has galvanized jihad-minded Muslims around the world. It's hard to imagine a set of policies better designed to sabotage the war on terrorism.

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