

Counterproductive Counterterrorism:

America's Struggles to Contain Terrorism in the Forever Wars

Juan Jose Montero Garzon

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are undoubtedly two of the largest and most controversial conflicts in recent American history, given the difficulty to determine the levels of success between these two conflicts. It is clear, however, that the United States saw some triumph in their approaches in Iraq, while seeing failures in the deliberate attempt to recreate these approaches in Afghanistan. Regardless, this study argues that U.S. involvement in these wars, whether it followed with a quasi-victory or not, resulted in an increase in Islamist terrorism in both countries alike. This paper utilizes case studies to determine how terrorism worsened, and does so by examining the counterproductive struggles of the U.S. to stay in Iraq and Afghanistan. The results from this case study suggest that U.S. interventionism potentially helped extremist groups such as al-Qaeda gain in Afghanistan and Iraq, amongst others.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are both considered by many to be some of the most futile, counter-productive, and least supported war efforts since the dawn of the 21st Century. The ongoing "War on Terror" approach harbored under several presidential administrations has created tremendous side effects to the rise of terrorism in these two countries alike, unlike anything that had been previously predicted. While there may have been limited success stories attributed to the efforts in Iraq, the U.S. was not as fortunate to recreate these successes

in Afghanistan. As a result, then-President Donald Trump signed an agreement in 2020 with the Taliban concerning the removal of the US military under the condition that radical militant groups would not be allowed to use Afghanistan grounds as a training base. In 2021, President Joseph Biden decided to focus the removal date of the U.S. military to be before the 20th anniversary of September 11th. Since then, the Taliban has seized control of Afghanistan, and violence has already ensued, along with countless debates concerning the role that the United

Created by Juan Jose Montero Garzon, Department of Political Science, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.
Correspondance concerning this research paper should be addressed to Juan Jose Montero Garzon, Department of Political Science, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Email:jjgarzon@cpp.edu

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States has had in worsening Islamist terrorism in the Middle East. For these reasons, this thesis centralizes on establishing the characteristics of American interventionism that have worsened Islamist terrorism in the Middle East. The relevancy of this topic is vast, and as a result, the primary goal of this thesis is to contribute to the already vast dialogue that exists on America's counterproductive struggle to shape the ideology of this region.

Centralizing on a definition of interventionism is highly important to begin this discussion. This paper seeks to define interventionism in the Middle East as any military interaction taken by a state to influence the government or economy of a different state. However, this definition is not universal. In fact, the charter of the United Nations defines intervention as interference by a state in the internal affairs of another state or in the relations between other states (Wright 1957), leaving out the military aspects included in this paper. One of the primary theories driving the increase of terrorism in relation to American interventionism is the theory of occupation, and the misuse of a heavy-handed approach to counterterrorism efforts. Thus, the interventionism that is being highlighted in this paper is primarily concerned with covert military operations, primarily ground-based.

Another form of terminology that must be defined for the furthering of this thesis is the meaning of "terrorism". Terrorism in this thesis is to be defined as any unlawful use of force or violence against civilian individuals, a government, institutions, or property for the sake of advancing a social or political objective/agenda. The terrorist groups that are the primary area of focus for this paper all meet the requirements established, and are recognized as terrorist organizations by the FBI and a plurality of other nation's intelligence agencies. This definition is highly important for the sake of consistency among the research conducted. One of the main areas that draws importance to this definition is in Afghanistan, due to the particularly unique group that is the Taliban. The Taliban is unique for a variety of circumstances, circumstances that will be examined in great

detail further along this thesis.

Several major theories help establish the causal relationships between interventionism and worsening Islamist terrorism. The first major theory is the concept of occupation whether it is direct or indirect, and ineffective democracy promotion. The case study conducted in this thesis strongly supports the theory of occupation specifically in the case of Iraq. Occupation refers to the length of time in which troops physically engage in a certain area. Unfortunately, this thesis goes on to reiterate some major findings in the literature review that suggest that a negative relationship exists between the length of time inhabited by U.S. forces and the levels of "worsening" terrorism. Occupation can take shape directly or indirectly, as direct intervention is categorized by the physical use of military force as a deterrent against any future terrorism; while indirect intervention is more in relation to the U.S. sponsoring other militant groups to fight against terrorist groups, or even through "winning the heart or minds" of the Iraqi/Afghani civilian.

The second and third major theories go hand-in-hand, and highlight the ineffective implementation of democracy promotion and lack of viable infrastructure to uphold stability by the United States. After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration strongly focused on the development of democracy in the Middle East as a national security priority. This stance has backfired strongly, and has not only provided gray zones in which radical Islamist groups are allowed to participate in politics, but it has also furthered the Anti-American sentiments that come with occupation as well as interventionism as a whole.

Taking into consideration the theories that could establish causal relationships between interventionism and worsening Islamist terrorism, I have established a clear hypothesis to my proposed thesis question: American interventionism has strongly worsened the state of terrorism in the Middle East. I acknowledge that there may be other individuals who hypothesize differently, and may turn to recent events in favor of maintaining military

occupation in Afghanistan. It is evident that as soon as President Biden began pulling troops out, the Taliban began to seize control. However, I believe the problems caused by the intervention of the United States reach deeper and would've continued to harm more lives than the recent outcome in leaving Afghanistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis is concerned with analyzing the impact of interventionism in relation to terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan post 9/11. In the literature that I have compiled, I have found that written works on the mishaps of the United States in relation to foreign interference are vast, especially in the regions of concentration for this paper. However, the aim of this thesis is to expand upon these failures of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency by the U.S. by analyzing the effect that they have had on terrorism and terrorist groups specifically. It is also important to note that these terms, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism, are not used interchangeably in this thesis. Counterterrorism is concerned with thwarting any concerns or threats of potential terrorism. The definition of counterinsurgency for this thesis, on the other hand, will follow the definition as established by NATO: a comprehensive civilian and military effort made to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances (2017). It is crucial that the overlapping themes of existing academia on the subject matter are mentioned. The literature review is organized into five separate sections concerning the origins of American interference in the countries of focus, the nation-building process and its failures, the manners of interventionism taken, the possible measures of terrorism, and the limitations of this thesis.

The Wars and Their Origins

It is clear that initial U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan is questionable, leading scholars to investigate theories as to why the United States became involved in these conflicts. In relation to Iraq, some scholars argue that our involvement was primarily concerned with ridding the international system of what much

of the western world perceived to be a cruel dictator and a threat in Saddam Hussein (Record 2008). Other scholars are under the impression that it may have been in our best interest to bring democracy to an area that, in the view of the United States, desperately needs it. It is evident, however, that the most popular answer is that the initial intrigue over Iraq involved investigating a possible nexus between then-President Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda's terrorism- as to investigate if Iraq truly did harbor weapons of mass destruction (Gregg 2018; Gewen 2007). There are few threats to humanity that herald the gravity that the possibility of nuclear terrorism holds, and it is understandable why this answer is arguably the top choice.

Our initial involvement in Afghanistan, like many of the theories behind our involvement today, is also disputed. Some scholars believe the United States initially became involved in Afghanistan as a means of, once again, continuing the spread of democracy. Others believe that it was simply a means of outclassing their Cold War-era foe of the Soviet Union. Regardless of the reason for the initial involvement, the lasting effects of supplying Afghan rebels with covert weapons and connections were felt much after the first withdrawal in the latter parts of the 20th century- from the attacks on September 11th, 2001 to the present day (Carson 2018).

After the notorious attacks on the Twin Towers, President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Afghanistan after the Taliban refused to extradite al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. An initial military operation turned into a hybrid war/nation-building project with the support of the international community. As stated earlier in this literature review, it is evident that this nation-building process was anything but successful, although that is a view that may differ in the eyes of the critiquer. The war in Afghanistan officially ended in August of 2021, with the Taliban securing the majority of Afghanistan and the fleeing of president Ashraf Ghani from the country. In terms of the wars in Afghanistan, multiple scholars happen to agree on the stance that these wars were never intellectually and politically sustainable (Boyle 2008).

Infrastructure and Nation-Building

The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were met with early criticism on many levels. Of the criticisms that arose from these conflicts, none had the mundane effects on citizens' lives like the lack of infrastructure that was put in place to assure the military independence of these countries. To start this discussion on a lack of infrastructure, there is no clearer example than that of Afghanistan. One major criticism of the international community and the United Nations (UN) as a whole is its one-size-fits-all approach to stabilizing a country. The UN's approach to stabilization almost always includes the "democratization" of said country. In Afghanistan, this model helped arrange a national conference with the Loya Jirga to reach an agreement on the structure of the political system. This conference was to be implemented and followed by democratic elections. This model, however, is often assigned without providing all the means necessary to uphold democracy (Enterline & Greig 2008). Arguably, the largest gap in resources in Afghanistan was the lack of a robust international peacekeeping presence (Ottoway 2002; Atal 2003; Dobbins 2008). Without a reliable presence, it is difficult to uphold the foundations presented to Afghan leaders.

The idea of nation-building is much easier said than done. Through assistance in conflict resolution, multilateral aid, and free elections, the United States and its allies should create a coherent and strong nation out of pre-existing power in that same nation (Ottoway 2002). nation-building itself can hold different meanings, all with the goal of creating a viable state out of one that can be classified as weak. nation-building is complex, and authors can agree that it does not only mean nationalizing the citizens of a nation. For example, our military strategy in relation to nation-building in Afghanistan focused on three tasks: "1) protecting the population; 2) giving money and projects to stimulate patriotism; and 3) linking the population with competent government officials" (West 2011).

The United States took a similar approach to nation-building in Iraq. The stances in Iraq were imperfect, and faults included creating macro-

level instruments of the state whilst overlooking programs and initiatives aimed at working through the population to stabilize the country. Initially, the goal of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) was to create a two to three-month period in which combat operations focused primarily on stabilization, followed by an eighteen to twenty-four month recovery phase. In this recovery phase, the intention of operations would be aimed at gradual U.S. force withdrawal, and to slowly integrate Iraqi forces such as local, military and indigenous forces to "receive the baton" from the U.S. (Dobbins 2008; Ricks 2006). Meeting all of these strategic campaigns would require a joint pro-national unity mechanism to rely on Iraqi institutions. The United States failed to create the necessary national unity for "rebuilding" Iraq, and in some cases, reinforced sectarianism (Gregg 2018). All of these failures contributed to the virtual collapse of 2014.

Heavy-Handed Approach & Direct Interventionism

For the purpose of this literature review and, on a larger scale, this thesis, I will be defining the "heavy-handed approach" as ground warfare, aerial warfare, and/or any fighting that classifies predominantly as a direct counterterrorism tactic used to try to find terrorist hidden amongst the people (civilians). Many scholars believe that the best offense is indeed the best defense in counterterrorism strategies. After the events of September 11th, President H. W. Bush capitalized on the "rally around the flag" syndrome as a way to increase support for the invasion of Iraq under the guise of fighting terrorism. This effect is a result of the irrationality of wartime: rallying-around-the-flag is typically the increase of support towards the president and presidential decisions during the time of war, typically in the form of high levels of patriotism (Gershkoff & Kushner 2005). A day after the attacks, 19 then-members of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO) invoked the defense clause, and considered the al-Qaeda attacks an "attack on all the nations". With this authorized use of military action, the United States, as well as its NATO allies, sent military troops into combat in Afghanistan until 2021 and

in Iraq until 2011 (Mahan & Griset 2013).

Since the start of the wars, it is nearly impossible to keep track of the civilians and even the military personnel that have died during their occupation, however, experts have estimated the death toll of these wars to amass to 170,000 in Afghanistan and nearing 1 million casualties in Iraq, according to Bloomberg (2018). The ultimate tragedy in a heavy-handed approach in these wars and in heavy-handed counterterrorism strategies is the loss of human life. However, direct interventionism is also arguably inefficient when concerning the effect that it has on terrorism. According to the Pentagon's Defense Science Board, there is sufficient data to show a strong correlation between U.S. interventionism and an increase in terrorist attacks (Mahan & Griset 2013). This idea will be further examined in the limitations section of this literature review.

Hearts/Minds Perspectives & Indirect Interventionism

Multiple scholars believe that a more efficient method of combating terrorism is through indirect interventionism, or the "hearts & minds" approach. This approach is carried out by winning the hearts and minds of civilians to ensure that we maintain a firm civilian lead alongside the United States in attempting to get rid of the insurgents. From a counterterrorism perspective, it is helpful to acquire human intelligence from civilians on matters pertaining to movements of terrorists or hideout locations. The hearts and minds approach comes especially helpful, however, as scholars suggest it is crucial that civilian oversight ensures that policy is not being made by the United States military (Burke 2010). Allowing civilians to create their own governments through the help of the United States military is a much more sustainable system than imposing new political structures that may not have the resources to survive in a weaker state, such as that of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Aside from winning the hearts and minds of citizens and groups in areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan, there are other vital measures that the United States can take outside of general warfare; thus, there are other measures of

indirect interventionism that scholars argue may be beneficial to improve the war on terror. Some scholars agree that the military should implement three major goals in order to overhaul the way America tackles terrorism ideologically. The first is moving away from the idea that terrorism is an ideology analogous to communism and fascism. Second, actively pursue the delegitimization of terror as a successful tactic while holding state-sponsors of terrorism accountable for their actions. Third, to institutionalize cooperation in the war and deprioritize ambitious policy choices (Boyle 2008). The aforementioned goals seek to invalidate the recurring theme of "democracy promotions" as outdated, and rejecting this belief can help refocus the goals of the war on terror. A grander, indirect change of ideology in American foreign policy could result in less harm to civilians in countries with a higher concentration of terrorist activity, and could consequently result in less Anti-American sentiment and, simultaneously, decreases support for local terrorist organizations (Boyle 2008; Jones 2013).

Measures of Terrorism

In order to understand if and how terrorism is successful, it is important to enumerate how terrorism can be measured. The literature that I have found has divided successes into two separate categories: attacks successfully carried out and land gains.

The "harder" method of tracking success for terrorist organizations is attacks carried out. As an example, there are three modern cases of successfully carried out attacks that ISIS has claimed, all having taken place in 2016: the Istanbul Airport attack that killed 44 people and wounded 238 others, the mass shootout in a gay nightclub in Orlando that killed 49 people and wounded 53 others, and an attack on Nice, France which killed 86 people and injured 458 others (Soliev & Sinan Siyech 2016). The reason that measuring successes for terrorist organizations in relation to successfully carrying out attacks is due to a plurality of reasons. First, it is extremely difficult to assign blame to a terrorist organization. For example, the attack in Nice was conducted by a

man that was mentally unstable and had no prior connections to ISIS. ISIS leaders took credit for the attack, regardless of the insufficient evidence to pin it on them. ISIS is willing to take credit in hopes of inspiring similar attacks across the globe. Similarly, countries are reluctant to assign blame for these reasons.

The “easier” case of success for terrorist organizations is land gains. As of September of 2021, the Taliban have stunningly taken over the majority of Afghanistan (Boot 2021). The Taliban, while having harbored and fought alongside terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, are not classified as terrorists according to the United States Department of Defense and their list of foreign terrorist organizations. This thesis does not actively enumerate the Taliban as a terrorist organization, as there is difficulty defining what the Taliban exactly is. Regardless of the controversy that follows this topic, it is no question that the state of stability currently in Afghanistan is historically one in which terrorist groups relish. After the first withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 al-Qaeda, which was mainly just a logistical network at the time, sought refuge and established themselves in Afghanistan under the patronage of the Taliban. As a result, a fear of the international world leads to the possibility of al-Qaeda re-establishing itself inside Afghanistan once again.

Limitations

While studying the existing bodies of literature, it was evident that there are countless articles detailing the failures of American interventionism, terrorism, counterterrorism strategies, infrastructure, nation-building, origins of the wars, etc. However, the main gap in the literature found was the lack of connections between American interventionism and the impact on Islamist terrorism in relation to “successes” of extremist groups. Primarily, the direct impact American interventionism had on terrorist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan. In studying the literature, it was evident that the U.S. had a counterproductive approach in relation to terrorism overall, but this paper seeks to understand the direct links that these occupations

and approaches had in relation to the militant groups themselves.

Expanding on this correlation is critical. After the attacks conducted on September 11th, Osama bin Laden delivered a speech explaining that they were indeed carried out as a response. In his speech, bin Laden stated that “[the United States has] been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism. In a nation at the far end of the world, Japan, hundreds of thousands, young and old, were killed and this is not a world crime. To them it is not a clear issue. A million children in Iraq, to them is not a clear issue...” (Morris 2019). Understanding the principles of these groups and their reasoning for the acts of terrorism committed is a vital field of counterterrorism that this paper aims to contribute towards.

The aim of the war in Afghanistan was muddled. However, it is clear that initially, some of the objectives of the initial intervention in 2001 were fixated on defeating the Taliban and eradicating any and all sources of refuge for al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The U.S. military maintained its occupation until 2021 regardless of arguably defeating the Taliban in November of 2001; resulting in hundreds of drone strikes and countless civilian casualties (Burke 2010; Dobbins 2008; Morris 2019). Similarly, scholars agree that maintaining occupation in Iraq would increase terrorism (Morris 2019; Chomsky 2017). A focal point for this correlation is behind the argument that The United States views the civilians of these nations with a higher concentration of terrorists as “other” and justifies noncombatant deaths as secondary in the purpose of stomping out terrorism by means of airstrikes or ground warfare. The effect of these drone strikes and civilian casualties are some of the main focal points that drive terrorist organizations to carry out attacks in the name of “retaliation”, and thus, worsen the state of terrorism. These effects will be reviewed in the case study portion of this thesis, by examining different terrorist groups in both Afghanistan and Iraq in order to review how much worse terrorism has become due to the faults of United States foreign policy.

METHODOLOGY

As aforementioned, this paper seeks to understand how the impact of interventionism by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan has worsened the state of terrorism in each of these countries in the 21st century. Thus, the independent variables for the forthcoming case study are the degrees of American Interventionism, and the dependent variables are the state of terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. This paper will examine these effects qualitatively, and will do so through a case study. In order to establish the degrees of worsening terrorism, the case study will compare how interventionism led to direct gains of terrorist groups in Iraq and Afghanistan as the main form of measuring if and how terrorism became worse at the hands of American interference. It is important to note that Western influence/interventionism isn't solely attributed to the United States, and the groups enumerated in the case study are not the sole perpetrators of Islamist extremism in these two countries.

Unfortunately, due to travel concerns and rising conflicts in each of these nations; the selected methodology will be limited, and will be conducted in the form of research-based analysis away from areas of interest, Iraq and Afghanistan. For these reasons, the form of research that has been chosen is a qualitative case study. The case study design selected is due to the similar nature of terrorism in these states, Iraq and Afghanistan. There are two goals that need to be accomplished within this research design: 1.) to further the existing academia on terrorism, and 2.) to analyze the given data in order to determine if and how overstepping caused an increase in terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. The two cases that I selected for this research design will be divided into separate sub-cases, in order to achieve an even more narrowed-down analysis. These sub-cases are terrorist groups, and include al-Qaeda's affiliates in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its continuation, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq. To clarify, ISIL can be classified as a direct continuation of Al Qaeda in Iraq, with the

U.S. taking harmful approaches that arguably

aided this group in both of their stages.

The choice of selecting these nation-states and the terrorists that inhabit them is due to the similar situations that were created in Iraq and Afghanistan alike. Arguably, the majority of the involvement in these two nations in the 21st century was due to somewhat of a response to the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Driven by our desire to hold the perpetrators of these attacks responsible, the United States began its muddy battle in Afghanistan over 20 years ago. The larger portion of the duration of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan was unsettling, and experts believe it was difficult to pinpoint if the U.S. stayed as long as it did due to pursuing democratic promotion or believing that the extremism wasn't eradicated. In fact, American Presidents of both political parties have agreed that the United States had no business maintaining occupation after the successful raid that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Thus, one part of this case study will seek to analyze how counterproductive it was to stay in Afghanistan and how it produced local anti-American beliefs that, potentially, helped al-Qaeda gain in Afghanistan.

Similarly, the United States also invaded Iraq as part of the War on Terror initiative. Initially, the attacks were done in response to national security threats imposed by the Iraqi government and the administration of Saddam Hussein possibly harboring weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD's). Furthermore, according to the United States a strong linkage existed between Saddam Hussein and radical Islamist terrorism internationally. Despite drawbacks from the international community and investigations from the United Nations assuring that there were no WMD's, the United States began occupying Iraq in 2003. Similar to the events that transpired in Afghanistan, the original goals of the occupation were heavily lost, and it became a hybrid nation-building project while simultaneously bombing/drone-striking areas with heavy concentration of terrorists that often resulted in major collateral damage. This method of drone strike recruitment heavily influenced the rise of more resentment towards the United States, and arguably directly contributed to the creation of ISIL in 2003.

Narrowing the focus to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda in Iraq/ISIL in Iraq was chosen in order to be able to quantify the “successes” of terrorism in the areas in relation to American intervention. In order to determine what classifies as worse terrorism, the measures of success for terrorist groups will be determined in terms of land gain and increased membership amongst other things. It is vital to acknowledge that these terrorist groups are not the only ones that perform acts of terrorism in these areas. It is also important to note that it is actually quite difficult to define what “terrorism” is and who “terrorists” are. An exemplar of this fine line is the Taliban, as they are the current imposed de facto government of Afghanistan. Self-defined as a political movement, it is difficult to give a title to what the Taliban classifies as. The Taliban actively allies itself with terrorist groups the likes of al-Qaeda and ISIL, and are involved in major criminal activity including the illicit trade of narcotics and human ransom. However, they are not currently designated by the United States and various international outlets as terrorist organizations. If included, the Taliban would be amongst the most successful terrorist organizations in the world, having amassed the majority of Afghanistan as land gain. However, it is for the controversial reasons enumerated that the Taliban has been purposely left out of this discourse.

Terrorism in this geographical area of focus is arguably a byproduct of the role of the United States performing its duties as a world police presence. As mentioned prior, the main gap in the literature found was the lack of connections between American interventionism and the impact on Islamist extremist groups. Narrowing this focus on the group level of analysis is a contemporary way of ensuring that this case study (and this thesis overall) contributes to fortifying the discourse on the root causes of terrorism and motivation for extremist groups.

RESULTS

Case Study 1: Iraq

Controversy followed President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003, regardless

of the administration’s resilient belief that there were major grounds for the U.S. to get involved. At the time, the intelligence agencies of both the U.S. and the United Kingdom agreed that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a necessary engagement for two major reasons: the weakly supported beliefs that Iraq actively collaborated with Al-Qaeda officials on the attacks on September 11th, 2001 and that then-president Saddam Hussein was aggressively pursuing the development of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD’s). The United States was focused on its goal of removing Saddam Hussein, regardless of the little to no evidence for either of the central claims that “supported” Operation Iraqi Freedom. This resulted in an employed strategy that resembled that of conventional war efforts, characterized by what scholars classify as a “heavy-handed approach.” This included large-scale battalion patrols and hard power strikes, effectively establishing a separation of the American soldier from the Iraqi civilian.

It is important to note that the political and economic state of this nation created dysfunctionality that terrorist groups historically thrive on. Some of the security risks that highlight Iraq’s sectarian divides are wide ranging, including their personal military conflict with ISIL in western Iraq, the deeply divided religious sections of Sunni and Shiites, and internal tensions between Kurd and Arab populations. These sectarian divides, along with the blunders of the U.S., created serious political power struggles that provided an invitation of sorts for radicalism.

Al Qaeda in Iraq/ISIL

As much as the rationale for the war in Iraq emphasized fixing the problems of governance attributed to Saddam Hussien, it primarily focused on waging war on terrorism. At the start of U.S. involvement in 2003, it was evident that the primary terrorist threats in Iraq consisted of decentralized Sunni militants that strongly opposed the U.S. and the primary Shia government of Iraq. Arguably, the most notorious of these militant groups was headed by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, a militant of Jordanian descent who shared similar anti-Shiite sentiments

and anti-American sentiments, sentiments that were exacerbated by the occupation of Iraq (Bakker 2007). These overarching attitudes were highly consistent with the existing beliefs of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Zarqawi's decision to cooperate and pledge loyalty to al-Qaeda effectively established the beginnings of the sub-section of al-Qaeda that was known as the Organization of the Base of Jihad in Mesopotamia, more commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), as well as al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (Cook 2018). Like many other Islamist extremist groups, AQI was infamously violent and graphic in carrying out its agenda. Zarqawi actively participated in giving AQI the destructive reputation that still stands to date, such as conducting high profile kidnappings of foreigners (Nick Berg and Kenneth Bigley, for example) and beheading them, and organizing suicide bombings targeting security buildings, government institutions, and Iraqi civilians (Cook 2018). These attacks were often conducted while making blasphemous remarks highlighting the importance of these gruesome acts for the sake of Jihad, or the struggle against the perceived enemies of Islam.

The beginnings of U.S. occupation itself clearly affected the origins of AQI. It also highlighted the shortcomings of American intelligence and the lack of effective experience fighting insurgency groups. One of the examples of military inexperience was the decision to establish a decapitation strategy on AQI, concentrating large portions of resources and military power to dwindle the numbers of influential AQI terrorists while doing anything possible to take out Zarqawi. This strategy culminated in 2007 with U.S. military forces successfully conducting a targeted killing of Zarqawi. While Zarqawi was successfully eliminated, the decapitation strategy proved to be somewhat counterproductive. The elimination of Zarqawi did not only create internal disagreement within AQI it also attracted a new wave of younger, less experienced yet more brutal terrorists. These individuals, often young foreigners, frequently carried out random and increasingly savage attacks with little experience. Like Zarqawi before them, they rationalized their

attacks for the sake of Jihad and a continuation of the "greatness" begun by Zarqawi in the area (International Crisis Group 2008).

The examples of U.S. military inexperience in fighting insurgency were bountiful in Iraq, and did not end at futile decapitation attempts. Unlike traditional warfare, counterterrorism is concerned with tackling a fundamental struggle over people, not physical land (Berman, Shapiro & Felter 2011). Another primary area where this inexperience was highlighted was the separation that was created between the Iraqi civilians and the military forces of the U.S. The occupation that resulted from Operation Iraqi Freedom featured hard-power strikes from the beginning, as the capital of Baghdad fell in control of the U.S. and its British allies less than two weeks after initial involvement primarily through the means of aerial bombardment (Sepp 2007, International Crisis Group 2008). It was also characterized by military patrolling in armored High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles. These two tactics, aerial strikes and patrolling in these large and sophisticated utility vehicles, clearly contributed to a disconnect between the Iraqi civilians and the foreign forces of the U.S. In counterterrorism efforts, a disconnect between civilians and the military is highly counterproductive, as the everyday civilian can be a major asset.

From the start, the Iraq war was susceptible to debates concerning the legality of the invasion and the initial approach of the War. Then-Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan believed the war blatantly breached the charter of the United Nations, stating that "from our point of view and the UN Charter point of view, it [the war] was illegal". The strategy for the war in Iraq echoed the views of President George W. Bush, and his belief that "only the use of armed force will accomplish these objectives and restore international peace and security in the area" (2003). A highly emotional response to the September 11th attacks and the priority of investigating the possibility of al-Qaeda collaborating with Saddam Hussien caused the U.S.'s initial approach to be a response of rapid dominance, or what scholars often call a "heavy-

handed approach”. In fact, the overarching initial belief for U.S. military leaders, including then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, was that the war in Iraq would be short and sharp, ensuring a quick return for the military personnel (Sepp 2007). This belief placed emphasis on the safety of the American soldier and further established the disconnect from civilian to military personnel. At times, this divide was initiated from the higher ranks of American intelligence; this could be as subtle as Rumsfeld’s outspoken goal of a quick return, to Major General Ray Odierno flat-out stating his priority was the protection of American troops.

A lack of an effective “hearts and minds” approach, which again is aimed at winning over the confidence of the everyday civilian, is detrimental to an effective counterinsurgency strategy. A successful hearts and minds approach is more likely to result in cooperation with non combatant civilians. One of the goals of successful cooperation is to provide the vital asset that is information sharing, an effective way of receiving information or tips from civilians on probable terrorist hideouts, locations of possible planned attacks, or any type of information that helps the U.S. in their counterinsurgency efforts.

This deficit of an effective civilian-orientated approach by the United States was certainly a major asset for AQI. It allowed the group to instill a sense of fear in major parts of the general population, and create more fear in the group than trust in the American troop: polling on Sunni populations in 2004 through 2007 demonstrated that around half of the populace supported the radical attacks from coalitions including AQI (Shaver & Zhou 2021). A poll such as the one conducted by Princeton Ph.D. candidates Shaver & Zhou has its limitations, as it is not quite clear if this high level of supposed support either depicted an accurate picture of actual support for violent extremism or it demonstrated the fear of being caught actively opposing the terrorist groups. Regardless of the unclear perspectives of the respondents of this poll, it still demonstrates the initial advantage groups such as AQI had over the American troops: the ability to “win” over civilians, albeit by force and savagery.

As previously stated, one of the central points of focus for the U.S. in their initial reasoning for their involvement in Iraq was the removal of Saddam Hussein. In President George W. Bush’s 2002 speech on the state of Iraq, he clarifies that “the fundamental problem with Iraq remains the nature of the regime itself”. This issue of governance was supported by then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld before his resignation in 2006, mentioning that the problems in Iraq are problems of political governance (Sepp 2007). In other words, to the Bush administration, one of the major problems in Iraq was the governance of the state. While this was a focal point of support for involvement, research shows that governance as a whole did not improve during the occupation of the U.S. in Iraq. According to The World Bank, Iraq had minimal improvement during U.S. occupation in areas of voice and accountability, political stability and absence of, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. The role of the U.S. in these categories is unclear. It is clear, however, that these interactions in Iraq came without any reliable or permanent solutions to the governance of the state.

The absence of reliable and permanent solutions translated to other aspects, primarily those concerned with democracy promotion, nation-building, and infrastructure. After the trial and execution of Saddam Hussein, the administration of George W. Bush was heavily interested in being involved in the creation of a new regime. The administration had hopes of establishing a Pro-Western face for democracy in the Middle East, and a potentially strong trade partner due to Iraq’s position in the oil trade. At the forefront of their priorities for a new leader, however, would be establishing a leader to be heavily involved and willing to work with the U.S. on counterterrorism efforts. This may have been accomplished in a manner that may still prioritize building the state and democracy for that manner, but in longer, more digestible periods. Instead of providing a roadmap, the U.S. assumed that democracy would be immediately accepted. This resulted in broad and often ridiculous suggestions being made. As an example, the U.S.

suggested holding caucuses to select their party preference or vote for preferred candidates from these parties without realizing the foreign nature of such a meeting; the word for “caucus” does not even exist in Arabic (Lake 2016). After the state was essentially toppled, the sectarian divides only increased violence.

Despite all the mishaps that took place during the occupation of Iraq, U.S. forces were able to learn that a conventional warfighting scheme would not be effective. After the historic peak of violence in 2006, classic counterinsurgency strategies started to become implemented. This included placing importance on local engagement, road and reconstruction projects, and a restrained use of violence (Gilmore 2011). After a successful troop surge in 2007, followed by record low levels of violence, it seemed that the new counterinsurgency strategy gave way to a limited success story in Iraq, a success story that the U.S. should have been able to more effectively implement in other parts of the world. Still, the effects of these late successes were felt after improving the conditions for terrorist groups to thrive in Iraq, even to present day as shown in the developments of ISIL in the early 2010’s from the remnants of AQI.

Conclusions on Iraq

All of the mistakes in Iraq, from the initial rapid dominance approach, the inexperience of fighting insurgency groups, the lack of an effective hearts and minds approach, the lack of implementation of sustainable infrastructure/nation-building efforts, and the overall divide between the Iraqi citizen and the American soldier during occupation all directly worsened the state of terrorism in Iraq. This terrorism was exacerbated through several different means. The first 12 months of occupation, which were characterized by a hard power approach, resulted in a grand total of 78 terrorist attacks in Iraq. The effects of this approach, for a plurality of reasons enumerated in this thesis, were felt even heavier the following 12 months as terrorist attacks rose to 302 (Gade 2007). A large portion of these consisted of suicide attacks, which increased in frequency every single year of U.S.

occupation, with an especially high number of these attacks coming between the years 2003 and 2005. Iraq became a training ground for suicide bombers and its effectiveness for the purpose of Jihad, with AQI at the forefront. AQI’s influence was heavily recognized on online platforms, as the group established itself as one of the first to actively and effectively recruit and provide terrorist networks for other radicals. AQI also innovated several less-common terrorist methods during occupation, primarily perfecting the use of car bombs and vehicle born improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) against the U.S. Similar to overall terrorist attacks and suicide-bombings, the use of VBIEDs increased every year over the course of the first five years of occupation, with 19 attacks in 2003, 54 attacks in 2004, 82 attacks in 2005, 101 attacks in 2006, and 204 attacks in 2007 (Gade 2007).

Even after the group transitioned to ISIL, the missteps of the United States were still strongly felt. The lack of reliable and permanent nation-building and infrastructure was one of the primary reasons for ISIL’s takeover in 2014, in which Iraq lost more than one-third of its territory to ISIL insurgents. It became clear that, even though there were some success stories attributed to the situation in Iraq, withdrawal may have come prematurely, without effective and permanent solutions in place (McNally & Bucala 2015). Withdrawal left the Iraqi Security Force incapable of safekeeping its civilian population, and under a divisive government that only increased the existent sectarian divides, leaving room for the resurgence of ISIL. In 2013, ISIL captured a major city in Mosul, and overtook many more Sunni cities in Anbar. The fall of Mosul, however, created a major chain reaction that resulted in a major loss of control over

Western Iraq for the government in Baghdad. ISIL’s actions today suggest the overarching goal of restoring the early Islamic “Caliphate”, beginning with these sections of Western Iraq.

Case Study 2: Afghanistan

After the tragic events of September 11, al-Qaeda was almost immediately identified as the main perpetrator of these terrorist acts. Soon

after, one of the main areas of emphasis for “The War on Terror” launched by President Bush and his administration was to bring down the host regime that harbored the majority of al-Qaeda: the Taliban government in Afghanistan. This focus on the Taliban was at first mildly successful: the U.S. backed forces had relatively quick and effective victories in 2001. This focus was unfortunately lost, and with it, a major loss in support from the international community as well as large sectors of the population in Afghanistan.

The complication of the war in Afghanistan is incredibly unique. As reviewed in the literature review section of this thesis, the goals of this war were often unclear, and the enemy ill-defined. The goal of this case study is not to define who the enemy was or even what the goals of the U.S. became, it is to contribute to the overarching theme of this thesis: to define how intervention in Afghanistan arguably helped the very terrorist threats the U.S. tried to eradicate, and how it worsened terrorism overall.

Al-Qaeda (Afghanistan)

From the beginning of the war effort, al-Qaeda terrorists saw the attacks conducted on September 11 to be in the name of retaliation against America and its anti-Islam beliefs. Behind the attacks carried out and at the forefront of the radical group was Saudi-Arabian militant Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden and the major organizers of the attacks were provided a safe haven by the Taliban in Afghanistan, creating an invitation for American intervention in the country.

The integration of Taliban forces and al-Qaeda radicals was a common occurrence in Afghanistan (Rogers 2004). The Taliban’s refusal to surrender bin Laden to the United States gave the correctly predicted idea from a majority of experts that occupation in the country would not solely be an overnight success. As previously mentioned, the beginning of the war in Afghanistan was primarily distinguished by some early successes. Frequently, conflicts would tilt to the side of what seemed to be a strong alliance of U.S. backed forces, primarily the CIA-supported 5th Special Group, the U.S. Air Force, and the anti-Taliban group Afghan Northern

Alliance (Adolph 2021). This strength drove out the Taliban relatively quickly, with a large number of Taliban leaders retreating into Pakistan until the Taliban’s resurgence in 2014. It became clear that the goals of the conflict, however, were over-complicated and unclear. Contributing to this complication was the reality that the U.S. arguably should have committed to the decision to back out of Afghanistan after these initial victories. Instead, the initial goals of the invasion were muddled, and the War in Afghanistan was turned into somewhat of a hybrid nation-building project.

One of the main problems of nation-building in Afghanistan is arguably one of the most obvious: nation-building efforts had begun without an actual end to the war. The U.S. simultaneously was fighting a war that focused its efforts in Afghanistan to tackle terrorism while concurrently trying to instill institutions and establish rule of law (van Biljert 2009). To add to this confusion, the financial support of the international community was minimal towards the U.S. in their nation-building project. The per capita aid in Afghanistan was only \$57 in the first two years of intervention. When comparing that to other situations in East Timor (\$233 per capita) and Bosnia (\$679 per capita), it becomes clear that state-building is easier when the resources are available (van Biljert 2009).

The absence of an effective hearts and minds approach was also clearly evident in the approach in Afghanistan. It started with the lack of knowledge of the county itself, and part of the fault of this lack of knowledge could be attributed to the Defense Department’s Human Terrain Systems (HTS) program for counterterrorism efforts. The HTS program not only didn’t effectively teach the military troops to speak Pashto or Dari, the two main languages spoken in Afghanistan, it also did a poor job in recruiting specialists of the region and its languages and customs (Hopkins 2010). This was not only a major hindrance, it fundamentally proved the lack of support of experts in the war effort from the very people aware of the futility behind the conflict. The lack of proper training in place contributed to some of the overall lack of

trust from the Afghani civilian to the American soldier, a concept that will be expanded further along this case study. A lack of trust results in an absence of knowledge sharing, and makes the fight against counterinsurgency increasingly difficult. Without this knowledge, it became almost impossible for the U.S. to follow a civilian lead war effort in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, winning over the Afghani civilian was not even close to being the primary concern of the war efforts. Unlike the events in Iraq, the initial efforts in Afghanistan were not primarily air-based (Rogers 2004). However, this strategy quickly changed, and the “drone-strike diplomacy” established in Iraq, Pakistan, and other parts of the Middle East continued into Afghanistan, confirming the sheer lack of hearts and minds strategy. This drone strike diplomacy was especially pertinent during the administration of President Barack Obama; it allowed a strategic fight that did not require Americans to die in ground-based combat. However, this created a separation between the Afghani civilians and the American troops similar to that of Iraq. Unlike Iraq, however, this created a conundrum for the Afghani civilian: can they trust or even work with what they perceived to be anti-Muslim military forces from the U.S., or do they keep quiet and “side” with the brutal Taliban?

Unfortunately for counterterrorism efforts, these were not the only two options for the Afghani civilian. The drone strike diplomacy that the U.S. often harbored not only aided this separation from the civilians, it was also actively used as a recruiting method for terrorist groups. One of the many specific instances in which terrorist groups effectively recruited civilians and carried out attacks as a response to drone strikes from the United States was the attack of a CIA outpost at Camp Chapman in the Khost region of Afghanistan in December of 2009. Al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-i-Taliban based in Pakistan jointly conducted these attacks, stating that they had conducted these attacks in the name of retaliation (Boyle 2013). These attacks in the name of retaliation were not just conducted on foreign soil. In 2010, Attempted-bomber Faisal Shahzad intended to blow up a bomb in Times

Square in order to respond to the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and its use of drone strikes during occupation (Boyle 2013). Shahzad, while not an Afghani civilian himself, had long wished to fight alongside extremist groups against the U.S. in Afghanistan for the sake of retaliation. As the U.S. focused on eradicating members of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan through aerial means, they were effectively playing a game of “Whack-A-Mole”: frequently killing some terrorists through the use of drones, while simultaneously creating invitations for radicalization through the killing of innocent civilians in these same strikes.

Conclusions on Afghanistan

The Taliban’s resurgence in the mid-early 2010’s was the beginning of the end for the War in Afghanistan. Starting as early as 2014, the Taliban was clearly able to regain major control over Afghanistan, including the ability to run high-profile attacks on district centers with ease, and to create “checkpoints” in major Afghan cities, including one in Hamid Karzai International Airport (McNally & Bucala 2015). This resurgence was especially threatening due to the Taliban’s obvious connections to al-Qaeda and its history of providing the group a safe haven in Afghanistan. These threats were unfortunately accurate, leaving cooperation in exhaustion insurgency efforts from al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the mid-late 2010’s. All of the aforementioned factors contributed to the unfortunate situation that Afghanistan finds itself in: the cooperation between the al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the lack of an effective hearts and minds counterinsurgency strategy, an ineffective nation-building approach, and the lack of resources to guide Afghanistan.

The U.S. saw examples of what premature withdrawal could mean for Afghanistan in Iraq after they withdrew in 2011 with limited success. In this case, however, the successes in an effective counterinsurgency effort that were found in Iraq could rarely be found during the entirety of the War in Afghanistan. Still, the decision by President Joe Biden to withdraw American troops was made, a decision that was echoed by various administrations since our initial involvement in 2001. This withdrawal leaves a

tremendous amount of security implications in the country. The Taliban is primarily in control of Afghanistan at the moment, as it currently controls an estimated 13 million residents in 212 of the country's districts, while the government of Afghanistan rules about 10 million residents in about 70 districts and in the capital, Kabul (Schweitzer 2021). This incredible control leaves room for potential mobilization from terrorist organizations, especially al-Qaeda due to two major reasons. The first is the historic cooperation between both the respective groups. This cooperation is evident in the joint exhaustion strategies that were carried out by the two groups against U.S. forces. It is most evident, however, in the Taliban's refusal to hand over terrorist threats and comply with counterterrorism efforts, most notably the refusal to turn over Osama bin Laden after the attacks on September 11th and the pressure from the international community to do so. Secondly, the connections the Afghan Taliban has with a significant segment of jihadists from around the world, most notably Bangladeshi jihadists who follow a common variant of Islamist ideology.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to pinpoint what the role of the U.S. will be in future conflicts. Arguably, the U.S. had no choice but to respond to the deadliest attack in human history: the September 11, 2001 attacks. This response was, from the beginning, expressing to the rest of the world and the terrorists who brought down the Twin Towers the strength and capability of America to respond. This display of strength and response from the beginning was evident in George W. Bush's famous bullhorn speech just days after the attack, warning that "the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon." The military strength of the U.S. is certainly not a secret, and in conventional warfare, the U.S. is almost entirely unstoppable. In both conflicts it was extremely well executed: Baghdad fell in control of the U.S. in merely 26 days, less than two weeks after initial involvement, and by December 2001, Taliban leaders surrendered their official territory within Afghanistan, less than 4 months

after the September 11 attacks.

The blunders of the U.S. came in these conflicts in ways that didn't involve warfighting. They were primarily a result of the U.S.'s inexperience in conducting effective counterinsurgency efforts. From these blunders, we can assume lessons for the next time the U.S. chooses to act in its assumed role of world police, a role that the U.S. has undertaken countless times. First, it must establish its goals in intervention. The U.S. in both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan turned into ill-defined. In Iraq, the initial concerns of weapons of mass destruction and a worry about governance from President Saddam Hussein initially led the motivation behind invading Iraq. Similarly, the involvement in Afghanistan was initially for the eradication of the Taliban and its safekeeping of al-Qaeda officials. In both of these situations, the original goals of the war effort were not the reason for further intervention in the conflict. The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were both turned into nation-building projects for the sake of possibly establishing a partner in the Middle East. The U.S. pushed for nation-building and, at times, even democracy promotion without either sufficiently providing the means to do it (Afghanistan) or doing so effectively (both cases).

Secondly, it must not treat all interventions equally. The occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq were too often intertwined and overlapped, the average individual may not even be able to define the major differences between these conflicts. The U.S. assumed that in both of these conflicts, the sheer military power of the U.S. and its allies would be enough to outlast and extinguish any of its enemies. When taking that same stance for any military intervention, a stance that was taken for both Iraq and Afghanistan, it shows the ignorance and the low levels of awareness of the vastly diverse and intricate areas of the world even if located in a similar region like the Middle East. It's also not effective to take these stances of democracy promotion when a state has for so long ignored democratic institutions. The answer for the U.S. is too often one that focuses on eradicating the anti-democratic regime, when it may be more effective to strengthen the existing

government and work towards democracy gradually, and not forcing it in the manners that were attempted in Iraq and Afghanistan alike.

Thirdly, the importance of an effective hearts and minds strategy is vital to most forms of American intervention. The lack of trust in both of these regions was alarming. The average Iraqi or Afghani civilian would at times hear of casualties by aerial bombardment or would be met by patrolling units in high-armored vehicles that forced a detrimental separation from them and the American forces, from a war they did not choose to fight in. When intervening in a conflict that involves counterinsurgency efforts, or any conflict for that matter, knowledge sharing is one of the most important aspects of winning the fight, or in this case, allocating the terrorist threat/organization. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. was so determined to essentially create new, more liberal forms of government for both of these nations. This paper elaborates on the errors of this approach, however, it is clear that an implementation of a hearts and minds perspective in creating these democratic institutions may have resulted in them being a lot more successful. A strong, civilian-led strategy is a central point to the hearts and minds perspective, and a civilian lead in establishing a new government may have contributed to its legitimacy.

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