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On Killing al-Zarqawi – Does United States Policy Know Its Tools in the War on Terror?

Donald J. Reed

"Do not rejoice that you killed (al-Zarqawi), he has left behind lions that ... trained under him."

Statement attributed to al-Zarqawi's reported successor Abu Hamza al-Muhajir.¹

TERRORISM PROCESSES VERSUS TERRORIST ENTITIES

The air attack that killed al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – the successful synchronization of actionable intelligence and tactical military operations that eliminated a key terrorist network node – was a good thing. Much of the media-pundit and popular analysis that followed has focused on the potential impact of al-Zarqawi's death on the outcome of the war in Iraq. The demand of the American public for information and results notwithstanding, the emphasis on outcome is not the right approach. Al-Zarqawi's death serves greater strategic purpose both in the war in Iraq, and in the larger war on terror, when viewed as process rather than as outcome or end-state.

The diffusion of threat specificity when viewing terrorism as a methodology, exemplified by the terror network known as al Qaeda, makes strategic thought difficult. Conventional wartime strategy has traditionally concerned itself with identifying enemy weaknesses or centers of gravity and using military force to strike at them. The issue becomes how to craft a strategy to exploit an asymmetrical enemy's weaknesses without always knowing who the enemy is, or even what means of war he will employ. A war that encompasses literally any group using terrorist tactics becomes impossibly broad, engulfing a wide range of groups that includes those posing no meaningful threat to the United States.

In the war on terror it becomes necessary therefore to distinguish between terrorism as a process and terrorist networks as entities. Terrorism, as a process, includes sub-processes that can be disrupted through the networking of political information security (i.e. military or law enforcement), economic, and social means. Those sub-processes vulnerable to disruption include: leadership development; alliance building; public and ideological outreach; acquisition of funding, materiel, shelter and support; recruitment; organization of efforts; indoctrination and training of personnel; planning and targeting; movement and operations; communications; and exploitation of results.² When viewed as entities, different targeted strategies are required to defeat individual terrorist networks depending on whether their ideologies are rooted in political, economic, cultural, or special-interest origins. Strategies focused against specific terrorist networks can be resource-intensive and there is no guarantee of success. It is not likely that terrorism can be eliminated by targeting terrorist networks, but by disrupting their processes terrorist networks can be contained or rolled back.

While it constitutes a tactical success and a great moral victory for the United States, it is likely that the death of al-Zarqawi will have little effect on either al Qaeda or the ongoing insurgency in Iraq. With a structure that has been described as “horizontal as opposed to hierarchical, and ad hoc as opposed to unified” the Iraqi insurgency has achieved the resiliency of a network.³ Removal of key nodes in the network leaves the remaining key nodes and links, and the white space between them intact and functioning. According to Bruce Hoffman of the RAND Corporation, “There is no center of gravity, no leadership, no hierarchy [to the Iraqi insurgency]; they are more a constellation than an organization. They have adopted a structure that assures their longevity.”⁴

If al-Zarqawi’s death leaves the Iraqi insurgency and al Qaeda intact and capable of continuing to fight, the questions for the United States become: Does his death advance United States policy in the war in Iraq, and the overall war on terror? How successful is the United States in disrupting the processes of the Iraqi Insurgency and of al Qaeda? As a corollary, what are the domestic implications? The answer perhaps can be found in the tools of policy that are available to the United States although its track record in using them has not always been good.

UNITED STATES POLICY AND ITS TOOLS IN IRAQ

In *On War*, in his discussion of war as an instrument of policy and the relationship between political and military interests, Carl von Clausewitz speaks of the “assumption that policy knows the instrument it means to use.”⁵ United States policy for Iraq, as established by the *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* is a nation that is “peaceful, united, stable, *democratic* and secure [italics added].”⁶ The tools by which the United States means to achieve its policy, as laid out in the *Strategy*, are political, security (i.e. military) and economic. Noticeably missing from the *Strategy* are effective applications of the information tool, which includes strategic communications, and the social tool, which includes culture and religion.

If we accept Clausewitz’s supposition as true, then it is not self-evident that United States policy knows the instrument it means to use in Iraq, despite the occasional military success in removing terrorist nodes such as al-Zarqawi. It appears the United States has elected to use military means as its primary tool to establish the necessary political, security and economic pre-conditions and processes for democracy in Iraq. It does not seem to focus at all on the social pre-conditions for democracy. This is a problematic approach.

Much of United States’ effort in Iraq from 2003-2005 has relied heavily on military occupation and counter-insurgency efforts to establish democratic processes. Thus far, they have produced very mixed results and it is not certain the means being used – military – are the correct means at all. Anthony Cordesman, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has touched upon this issue. In *Rethinking the Challenge of Counterinsurgency Warfare: Working Notes*, he writes, “Democracy is the last, not the first, priority [when fighting an insurgency]. Security, effective governance and services, rule of law and limits to corruption, education, health, and employment all have a much higher priority.”⁷ It is here, in the processes for achieving the priorities laid out

by Cordesman, that the death of al-Zarqawi has the potential to serve its greatest purpose.

The proof of this assertion is in the lack of progressive results thus far. From 2004-2005 the nature of the insurgency in Iraq – an insurgency the Bush Administration was reluctant to recognize – changed. During this period the number of American troop deaths in Iraq declined by six percent and the number of American troops wounded declined by thirty-three percent. This is not, however, an indicator of progress in achieving the stated goal of a democratic Iraq. As reported by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, at the same time American casualties were declining the Iraqi populace experienced a different and much starker reality: an increase in insurgent attacks and in casualties, as shown in the table below.

The Nature of Attacks in Iraq, 2004-2005

NATURE OF ATTACKS	2004	2005	Difference
Insurgent Attacks	26,496	34,131	+ 29%
U.S. Troops Killed	714	673	- 6%
U.S. Troops Wounded	7,990	5,369	- 33%
Car Bombs	420	873	+ 108%
Suicide Car Bombs	133	411	+ 209%
Suicide Vest Attacks	7	67	+ 857%
IED Attacks	5,607	10,953	+ 95%

- Notes:
1. The average success rate (attacks that cause damage or casualties) = 24%
 2. Insurgent attacks focused more on Iraqis and less on U.S. forces in 2005.
 3. The total number of U.S. casualties dropped from 2004 to 2005 but the number of attacks increased.

Reliable figures are difficult to obtain but the Center for Strategic and International Studies indicates that, by one media estimate, for every United States soldier killed in Iraq at least thirteen Iraqi civilians are killed. Its conclusion is that the trends indicate “cycles in an evolving struggle, but not signs that the struggle is being lost or won...There have, as yet, been [no] decisive trends or no tipping points: simply surges and declines.”⁸ The increase in Iraqi casualties reflects a shift in the focus of the al-Zarqawi-led insurgency away from attacking United States and Coalition forces and toward igniting a sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. These conditions hardly seem conducive to convincing the Iraqi people that democracy is working for them.

The United States’ Track Record in Fostering Democracy

If the military and security conditions for achieving democracy in Iraq remain uncertain, the political, economic, and social conditions are even more so. In a 2003 article entitled “Democracy? In Iraq?,” Chappell Lawson and Strom Thacker of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University, concluded that while United States efforts are not completely hopeless, “Iraq is unlikely to sustain democratic institutions, even given protracted U.S. occupation.” They base their conclusion on empirical studies that indicate “Iraq has few of the success factors associated with democracy, such as a high degree of economic development and a Western cultural tradition.”⁹

Lawson and Thacker measured levels of democracy on a numerical scale during 1996-2000. Not surprisingly, Iraq under Saddam Hussein scored lowest on the scale along with other countries such as Afghanistan (under the Taliban), Burma, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam. From their data they concluded that richer, more literate, more egalitarian, and more homogenous societies do better at establishing and sustaining democracy. Petro-states, countries with high Muslim populations, and societies with little cultural affinity for the West tend to be less democratic. Lawson and Thacker conclude that Iraq would likely not become a free society on its own.

Lawson and Thacker also looked at the impact of American occupation on the likelihood of a country establishing and sustaining democracy. In the last century the United States has occupied nineteen countries with the goal of reshaping their political systems. They found that in about half the cases democratic institutions lasted, but in the other half they did not. At best, American occupation seems to be only a modest and indirect influence on the future long-term development of other countries. Those countries that became democratic following American occupation already had the necessary social, economic, and political pre-conditions that made them more likely to do so, and those that did not have those indicators were unlikely to make the transition.

Domestic Implications

As the terrorist attacks of 9/11 demonstrated, no longer can the United States rely on the conventional protections of time and distance as a result of being surrounded by vast oceans and air space. Instead, unconventional attacks may

come with little or no warning, and they may occur against United States citizens and interests at home as well as abroad. In the war on terror future attacks on the United States may originate from within as well as from outside the nation's borders. The question of whether policy knows its tools is equally applicable on the domestic front.

United States policy for domestic counterterrorism is established by the *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, which calls for preventing terrorist attacks within the United States, reducing America's vulnerability to terrorism, and minimizing the damage from attacks that do occur.¹⁰ Unlike the war in Iraq where the primary United States policy tool is military, the primary policy tool for domestic counterterrorism is law enforcement. The National Vision for domestic counterterrorism established by the *National Strategy for Homeland Security* is to "redefine our law enforcement mission to focus on the prevention of all terrorist acts within the United States, whether international or domestic in origin."¹¹ Effective application of the information tool is prescribed within the *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, but it does not mention the use of the political, economic, or social tools for domestic counterterrorism.

Similar to the insurgency in Iraq the greatest domestic terrorist threat comes from resilient terror networks, whether transnational or domestic. Realizing that not all potential threats can be prevented, a network-centric response that incorporates all the tools of policy – political, information, security (military or law enforcement), economic and social – is required. Network-centric operations refers to the linking of people and systems into a common shared awareness network at all levels – international, federal, state, local, tribal, private – to obtain information superiority and enhanced decision-making and response. The working theory of network-centric operations is that organizations and agencies that are networked will outperform organizations and agencies that are not networked. Within such a concept, the transit of threats from their source to their targets at the local level presents a series of processes that can be disrupted in order to defeat, deter, preempt, prevent, protect and respond to them.

The concept of network-centric operations, however, is not simply about technology, *per se*; it is also about behavior. The idea is to feed information as quickly as possible to leaders and operators so they can make better-informed decisions about what, when and how to respond to threats. In contrast to traditional operations that are agency-specific, network-centric operations focus on passing information and intelligence among different agencies and entities to increase their ability as a whole to respond to threats.

THE WAY AHEAD

If United States policy is to be successful in the war on terror, if democratic processes are to have a chance to take root in Iraq and if terrorist attacks within the United States are to be prevented, it will be necessary for United States policy makers to adhere to Clausewitz's assumption that "policy knows the instrument it means to use." In doing so, they must use all the tools available – diplomatic, information, military/law enforcement, economic and social – to disrupt the processes of terrorism while simultaneously fostering the processes by which democracy can flourish. Of these tools, the security – military and law

enforcement – option offers the lowest probability of long-term success, particularly if wielded in isolation from the other tools. Unless the processes that breed them are addressed there will always be another al-Zarqawi to confront.

Unfortunately, there are signs that the administration does not understand Clausewitz's assumption, as it is scaling back funding for the main organizations trying to build democratic institutions in Iraq such as political parties and civil society groups. According to the *Washington Post*, agencies such as the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the International Republican Institute will see their grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development dry up in 2006, leaving them only special funds earmarked by Congress last year. Similarly, the U.S. Institute of Peace has had its funding for Iraq democracy promotion cut by sixty percent, and the National Endowment for Democracy expects to run out of money for Iraqi programs by September 2006.¹²

Writing in the *New York Times*, Retired Marine Corps Colonel Thomas X. Hammes, author of *The Sling and the Stone: On Warfare in the 21st Century*, outlines what he calls a laundry list of United States inaction in Iraq.¹³ Among the actions that Hammes says greatly increase the likelihood of civil war are diversion of nearly half the money allocated to reconstruction in Iraq to other needs, including security; cuts in financing for democratization efforts, many of them undertaken by nongovernmental groups; proposals for cutting overall Army and Marine forces for fighting the “long war” in Iraq; inauguration of only four of the proposed sixteen Provincial Reconstruction Teams; and continuous undermanning of Army staffs and units in Iraq, even those training Iraqi security forces. The result, according to Hammes, is,

The [Iraqi] militias are already looking ahead: some are carving out safe areas they will use as bases in the coming [civil] war by driving Iraqis of other ethnic and religious groups out of mixed neighborhoods and villages. Iraqi government officials estimated that more than 100,000 families have already fled their homes. This falling back on militias and preparing for internecine conflict is not a new phenomenon. It is exactly what we saw in Afghanistan nearly two decades ago. Once the Afghans believed the Soviet troops were finally pulling out, the various insurgent groups stopped fighting the invaders and began positioning for a multisided civil war. That conflict, of course, lasted until the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001.¹⁴

On the domestic front, the United States faces the risk of complacency in the war on terror and much more needs to be done to build networks for confronting the terrorist threat. Nearly five years after the attacks of 9/11 and the pronouncement of a Global War on Terror, metrics for performance related to clear and obtainable national objectives are largely lacking. Measurements are inextricably linked to strategies. While the goals of terrorist groups may be diametrically opposed to those of the United States, however, they may also be tangential in nature with each side achieving objectives and making progress according to their different measurement systems.

It remains an open question as to why al Qaeda has not followed its attacks of 9/11 with additional attacks on the United States. The absence of attacks could be taken as an indicator of successful Homeland Security countermeasures implemented by the United States. Another alternative could be that the 9/11 attacks allowed al Qaeda to accomplish its strategic objectives and it sees no need for further attacks on the United States at this time. Uncertainty with respect to wartime strategies and measurements makes it difficult to determine or to demonstrate progress.¹⁵

Writing nearly four years after the 9/11 attacks, John Arquilla, co-editor of *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*,¹⁶ describes the way ahead on building counterterrorism networks:

If we ... see ourselves as just part of a network fighting for civil society worldwide, good things are going to happen. And good things will keep happening as long as our police, military and intelligence agencies come to realize that their strength grows from networked information-sharing with each other. This is a lesson not yet learned at the top, despite the examples provided by real successes of networking achieved by our allies. Failure to learn this lesson would leave us ill prepared to defend the U.S. against either Al Qaeda or other networks likely to rise in the coming years, in emulation of Bin Laden, the dark pioneer of netwar.¹⁷

Given the current outlook, until the United States begins to use effectively all its tools of policy both in Iraq and on the domestic front, and focuses on processes rather than tactical outcomes, the conclusion to be drawn is that there will be an endless line of al-Zarqawi, or even Bin Laden, successors and the future will remain uncertain. The terrorist threat will remain unabated and the lessons learned, or not learned, will carry over to the larger war on terror overall.

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¹ Aljazeera.net, "Zarqawi Successor Vows Vengeance," June 13, 2006.
<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/988B0002-1C7E-43B7-8DAE-6206474EF106.htm>.

² *Combating Terrorism: The Challenge of Measuring Effectiveness*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, Order Code RL33160, Library of Congress, November 23, 2005, 5.

³ *New York Times*, "Profusion of Rebel Groups Helps Them Survive In Iraq," December 2, 2005, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 607.

⁶ *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2005), 3.

http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/iraq_national_strategy_20051130.pdf.

⁷ Anthony Cordesman, *Rethinking the Challenge of Counterinsurgency Warfare: Working Notes* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 7, 2005).

⁸ *Iraq's Evolving Insurgency: The Nature of Attacks and Patterns and Cycles in the Conflict*, Working Draft, Revised (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2006).

⁹ Chappell Lawson and Strom C. Thacker, "Democracy? In Iraq?" *Hoover Digest* 3 (Summer 2003).

¹⁰ *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Washington Post*, "Democracy in Iraq Not a Priority in U.S. Budget," April 5, 2006.

¹³ Thomas X. Hammes, Colonel, USMC, *The Sling and the Stone* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Zenith Press, 2004); Thomas X. Hammes, "Tearing Iraq Apart," *New York Times*, June 1, 2006.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Combating Terrorism*, 2.

¹⁶ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (editors), *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

¹⁷ John Arquilla, "It Takes A Network," *Los Angeles Times* (August 25, 2002).