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God, history and countering insurgency

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PRIME Minister Tony Blair has said that God and history will judge his decision to send British troops into Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. His implication was clear: it is too soon to deliver a verdict on the invasion; such events are assessed in the grand sweep of eras and centuries, long after the main players have left the stage.

Yet history's verdict is crystallising faster than anyone expected – and it bears little resemblance to the dreamy pre-war forecasts of London and Washington. Even with the removal of Saddam and improvements to the lives of many ordinary Iraqis, the war is increasingly seen in the West – and elsewhere, overwhelmingly – as a moral and strategic failure. After three years of brutal violence, sectarian fault-lines, cases of torture and abuse by coalition forces – can history's verdict on the Iraq War still be in any doubt?

Yes, but not for long. The *casus belli* may have disintegrated in the fruitless post-war search for weapons of mass destruction, but if the plan to occupy and transform the country had proved successful, and a unified Iraq was progressing more or less peacefully towards some form of representative government, would anyone still be listening to opponents of the war? The same question might be asked of the forgotten war -- in Afghanistan. What might be required of coalition forces to achieve the seemingly impossible in these countries: improve security, provide a basis for economic development and prosperity *and not lose* the fundamental tenet of counter-insurgency -- of winning 'hearts and minds'?

Describing the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan *as they are* would be a good place to start. They are complex insurgencies; they are not communal civil wars (at least not yet), nor are they synonymous with the US-led war on terror – now re-labelled 'The Long War' – as Washington previously averred.

The British Lesson from Malaya

For Britain, the historical template in countering insurgency is the 1950s Malaya campaign. Doubtless, valuable lessons were learned from its execrable reign in Mesopotamia three decades earlier, where the British were responsible for shepherding a fledgling Iraqi nation to statehood. Their premature pullout in 1932 led to deeper insecurity, the rise of a brutal dictatorship and a general collapse of all British-built institutions.

The key lessons drawn from Malaya was the need to: separate the insurgent from the population; act always within the rule of law – and establish the rule of law if necessary; base operations on sound intelligence; strive never to alienate the local population; devise means

to strengthen the local economy; fill the security and bureaucratic vacuum with technical expertise, resources and, if necessary, the military; and, critically, set a timeframe, both for the political process and the parallel withdrawal of troops. Britain's later experience in Northern Ireland highlighted also the need for intelligence-driven operations in an urban setting, but again providing the temporary security space to manufacture a permanent political solution.

Today's insurgencies are different, however.

First, they have become infinitely more complex and dispersed, involving groups separated by geography and nationality, but organically linked by a core issue: in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, Muslims uniting against perceived American hegemony. And so too the response: there is a new imperative to build coalitions not just amongst dissonant military alliances but across diplomatic, political and non-governmental sectors, including donors, multilateral actors such as the UN and the World Bank, private security companies and humanitarian agencies. Each of these operations have to be, in turn, managed across a number of contemporary 'fronts' – local, regional, international and in the media.

The second, related difference is the emphasis on media operations, which must be front and centre of any strategy to stabilise Iraq and Afghanistan, and tailored to the specific demands of each. International media – especially the Internet – has offered jihadist insurgencies, for example, a network linking their otherwise disparate aims and furnishing ostensibly local events with 'global' significance. As such, managing the counter-insurgency thus requires more nuance and sophistication, but it also provides enhanced means to harmonise actions and develop collective transnational strategies. It is through the media that an alternative national vision – free of terror, steadfast in its application of the rule of law, and grounded in the respective cultural frameworks – will need to be championed. A media strategy has to be proactive, dictating its own tempo through managing access and information and not simply responding to events. It has to aim to overtly identify and articulate common interests across political divides.

Continuous articulation of this vision, not high-minded rhetoric, is the best antidote to the potent imagery of Western malfeasance and degeneracy propagated by insurgents. A media strategy has also to undo the public's conflation of Afghanistan and Iraq, just as it has to distinguish between locally-recruited insurgents and Al-Qaeda jihadists, not least because this will assist in developing political strategies necessary for stabilising the security situation and accommodating the insurgents. As the former Indian officer Anit Mukerjee reminds: "Insurgency can never be militarily defeated. It can only be managed until a political solution is found."

Third, development is key to success. An economic revitalisation package that seeks to co-operate with the sometimes standoffish non-governmental sector should be established. A functioning economy free from foreign aid is the stuff of which nations are made, but essentially requires both NGOs and international organisations to commit to doing themselves out of a job.

Lawrence of Arabia

A fourth step remains, as the soldier-scholar John Mackinlay argues, the need to "secure strategic populations against subversion". Andrew Krepinevich, a Vietnam veteran, has popularly espoused an 'oil spot strategy'. Rather than focus on hunting down the enemy in Iraq, the coalition forces should concentrate on securing specific towns and transforming

local services including schools, medical centres, sewerage, water, roads, and electricity, making life such that no one would want to support the insurgents. In time, the argument goes, success will spread slowly outwards as if from an ‘expanding oil spot’. As TE Lawrence – Lawrence of Arabia – responded to a question about how he worked with Arabs during his First World War desert campaign: “You handle Arabs, I think, as you handle Englishmen, or Laplanders or Czechoslovaks, cautiously, at first, and kindly always.” In dealing with his Arab friends and allies, Lawrence counselled “patience, respect, tact and even a good dose of humility”.

Fifth, and finally, all the threads of the military, diplomatic, socio-economic, governmental, non-governmental, international and local, bilateral and multilateral, and civilian and official need to be braided together. Such harmony requires, however, a level of trust with local forces beyond involvement in joint tactical operations to sharing intent, planning and tasking. And while planning is imperative, it has to permit operational dexterity and flexibility. Thinking for the longer-term requires balancing short-term operational demands with nation-building efforts, aiming for a sustainable upward peace and development trajectory rather than quick wins.

All this demands a very high degree of operational cohesion, prioritisation and coordination, from the tactical right up to the overarching political. But it is not mere utopian theorising. By centralising local control to international commanders and granting them the space to link operational theatres – not least to prevent insurgents from doing the same – and build alliance cohesion through organised networks of donors, the response is likely to be far more ‘joined-up’ – and effective. Thus control of the insurgency will fundamentally depend, paradoxically, on relinquishing political control and devolving authority.

TE Lawrence said: “War upon rebellion was messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife.” Rather than trusting in God to manage this long, hard and slow task, harnessing the most formidable tools of the opponent – grievances hardwired by global communications and founded on perceptions of global alienation – offers the best and likely only means to do so. Globalisation is both the jihadist’s soup and Lawrence’s spoon.

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