

THE IRAQ WAR AND THE MIRROR OF VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Hindsight, they say, is twenty-twenty. If you are the U.S. and U.K. governments, you could perhaps make this point to counter any criticisms being directed your way for the decision to take your country into the war in Iraq of 2003. But, anybody who followed the build-up to the Iraq war in the media and policy circles will recall with some degree of clarity that there was a very strong sense of scepticism and doubt about the entire military campaign the U.S. and U.K. were about to embark upon. The United Nations' weapons inspectors were frustrated that they were not being given enough time to finish their task of finding the 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' that both the U.S. and U.K. were convinced Iraq possessed. Neither were those who understood the history and affairs of the Iraqi nation buying into the links that were claimed to exist between Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime and al-Qaeda to justify the war.

The global public was suspicious of the official reasons being cited for the war and took to the

streets in their tens of millions to pressure the U.S. and U.K. into not starting a war with Iraq. But, their cries of "stop the war" fell on ears that had already been deafened by the sound of beating war drums. This paper discusses two of the seen and unforeseen outcomes of the U.S.-led Iraq war: the emergence and amplification of Muslim militancy and the creation and implementation of the U.K.'s countering violent extremism policy 'Prevent'.

CONSTRUCTING AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ

The invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the deposing of Saddam Hussein, was done on two grounds. First, Iraq was claimed to possess Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and secondly, that Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda were alleged to be working jointly to execute political violence targeted at the west, including through the use of Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) attacks. On 5 February 2003, the U.S. Secretary of State Colin

Powell made a speech at the UN Security Council to drum up support for the impending war by highlighting Iraq's links to al-Qaeda. "Every statement I make today is backed up by sources" he claimed, "solid sources." Powell then told the UN that "what we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence ... from human sources" (The Guardian, 2003).

One of the 'human sources' Powell was referring to was a man named Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi who had been captured in Pakistan in November 2001 and rendered to Egypt (Qureshi et al, 2016; University of Kent, 2021). During the course of his detention, al-Libi was tortured and waterboarded and told his interrogators that Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda were working together to launch attacks against the West using CBRN weapons (Qureshi et al, 2016; University of Kent, 2021). Colin Powell then used this false confession tortured out of al-Libi to connect Iraq and al-Qaeda and justify the invasion of Iraq. Of course, by the time it emerged that Powell's source was a man who had given false information after being tortured, the U.S. and U.K. war-horses had already bolted from their stables and it was too little and far too late.

But those with some knowledge of the history and affairs of Iraq at the time were deeply sceptical of the veracity of the alleged link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda (Gerges, 2016). Ba'athism, which is a secular Arab-nationalist ideology, is vehemently opposed by Muslim militant groups such as al-Qaeda. Though Saddam Hussein adopted more Islamic rhetoric in the 1990s and pulled stunts such as commissioning the writing of the Qur'an using his blood, these were attempts at seeking credibility amongst a disgruntled population living with the effects of crippling U.S. sanctions more than anything else.

Osama bin Laden was also on record as opposing Saddam Hussein. He publicly criticised Saddam's use of chemical weapons in the 1980s and compared his violence that was targeted at "our Kurdish brothers in the name of odious nationalism" to the brutal massacre the U.S. military engaged in the Iraqi city of Falluja in 2004 (MEMRI, 2004). When Saddam Hussein annexed Kuwait, Osama bin Laden is also reported to have told the Saudis to permit him to build an army of 100,000 mujahedeen-fighters who would liberate Kuwait from the Iraqis; a request that was denied by the Saudis in favor of the U.S.-led Gulf War of 1991 (Jehl, 2001).

ABU MUSAB AL-ZARQAWI: A MILITANT MASTERMIND?

Despite this historically precedented and documented condemnation of Saddam Hussein, a link was still being made between the two by the U.S. But this link was not focused on Osama Bin Laden directly. It was being made through Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; a militant who would earn notoriety because of the importance and significance the U.S. was placing on him. "What I want to bring to your attention today is the potentially much more sinister nexus between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network," the U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told the UN Security Council. "Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants" (The Guardian, 2003).

Until the 9/11 attacks, Zarqawi was unknown to western security agencies, including the CIA. He only emerged on their radar after Kurdish and Jordanian intelligence agencies flagged him as a threat to their regional interests (Napoleoni, 2005).

His name was also largely peripheral in the world of Muslim militancy and largely unknown outside of his native Jordan (Napoleoni, 2005). But the need to concoct a link between Iraq, al-Qaeda, and the 9/11 attacks in order to build a case for war with Iraq needed a figurehead. Through the profile and commentary around Zarqawi, the U.S. had found a man for the job. In a very short space of time, Zarqawi had been transformed into an al-Qaeda mastermind.

This helped to secure both Zarqawi's legitimacy and followers, and eventually, led to his appointment as leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq by Osama Bin Laden. "The warrior comrade Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi is the commander [Amir] of the al-Qaeda organization in the land of the Tigris and the Euphrates" is how Osama Bin Laden put it in a video-recording that was released to Al-Jazeera (MEMRI, 2004). This granted Zarqawi further legitimacy amongst Sunni fighters in Iraq and the region. The multiple groups and factions who had emerged to resist the U.S. occupation had found a figurehead and leader to organize their resistance around. Al-Qaeda was also benefiting from the PR coup it had secured thanks to the U.S. government. Its image was strengthened as a resilient and organized armed group who, despite facing losses in Afghanistan and being on the run, were fearlessly operating on the front-line of the second-front the U.S. had opened in Iraq.

CAMP BUCCA AND THE SEEDS OF ISIS

As the U.S. occupation and counterinsurgency campaign was in full swing, thousands of Iraqis were being arrested and

detained by the U.S. military in specially created prison-camps such as Camp Bucca in preventative detention. Among the Iraqis taken into custody were hardened militants and Saddam loyalists who began to plant the seeds for a new organization that would have revised objectives: to fight the U.S. occupation, to cleanse Iraq of its Shia population, and to establish something resembling an 'Islamic State.'

The world would come to hear of this group a decade later in 2014 through a whole host of names and acronyms including ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, and Daesh.

Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the now deceased leader of ISIS who oversaw the group's capture of territory in both Iraq and Syria with a precision and speed that was quite unprecedented, had spent five years incarcerated by the U.S. military at Camp Bucca (Chulov, 2014). Other senior figures such as ISIS's second-in-command, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Qasim, who oversaw and managed the influx of 'foreign fighters' from around the world, were also incarcerated at Camp Bucca (Chulov, 2014). Mixing freely with them were Saddam loyalists and Ba'athists. "We could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else. It would have been impossibly dangerous" is how Abu Ahmed, who had been detained in Camp Bucca, described the significance of the mix of inmates at

Camp Bucca. "Here, we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred metres away from the entire al-Qaeda leadership" (Chulov, 2014).

The leadership of the Iraqi wing of al-Qaeda, however, was soon to become ISIS thanks to the help and influence of the ex-Ba'athists who brought a very detailed and tested suite of military, bureaucratic, and administrative skill-sets to the table. When matched with the dedication of the Muslim militants, the seeds for a formidable and brutal force had been laid right under the nose of the U.S. military.

The dark irony of the story of armed Muslim groups such as ISIS is that without the U.S. launching its war, the circumstances that saw its formation and rise would never have existed. Had the U.S. not played an active role in constructing a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein through the figure of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi as a way of justifying its invasion, al-Qaeda and later ISIS would never have been able to incorporate various insurgent groups that had organically emerged under its banner with the speed and effectiveness it did. Without the invasion of Iraq, a power vacuum would not have surfaced that would spark a civil war in Iraq. But, to justify and launch the Iraq war, the U.S. had sidelined the outcomes, consequences, and warnings that had been predicted out of a mix of ignorance, arrogance, and hubris.

WE DO WHAT YOU DID TO US

One of the consequences of the brutality and arrogance of the U.S. is the way both were soon replicated by groups such as ISIS that emerged as a result of the invasion of Iraq. The mirror of U.S. violence is perhaps no more visible than through the use of torture and confinement used by ISIS.

There was a morbid irony and symbolism in ISIS's parading of hostages and prisoners such as the British engineer Ken Bigley, the British aid worker Alan Henning, and U.S. journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff in black hoods and orange prison uniforms in slickly produced propaganda films made using high-definition camera technology. Anybody who has seen these videos and images will be able to see the striking similarity to the way Iraqi and Muslim prisoners were dressed by the U.S. military in internment camps such as Guantanamo Bay and U.S. military-prisons in Afghanistan and Iraq. This has perhaps been one of the more underreported legacies of the so-called 'Global War on Terror' and the Iraq War; how an entire group of people subjected to the violence of the U.S. through torture and its numerous variants such as mock executions, hooding, and beatings (euphemistically and legally referred to as 'Enhanced Interrogation') went on to mirror their use.

But this mirroring did not just stop with how captives were treated. It also operated in the cultural sphere. Militants belonging to groups such as ISIS, for example, went on to produce propaganda material that co-opted and employed messaging styles and themes that the U.S. had created to reproduce its military superiority and strength. Through slickly produced social media campaigns, for example, images and posters relating to the first-person-shooter game "Call of Duty" were doctored and used as a way of recruiting new members, especially from Europe and America who would have familiarity with the game, to ISIS. Military manuals such as "How to Survive the West" told readers to learn about spying and counter-surveillance techniques by watching Hollywood films such as the "Bourne" trilogy series starring Matt Damon.

Through these very simple examples, we can see how military power and its supporting culture that was created and used by the U.S. came to be replicated in deeply dark ways. But, rather than seeing this replication of violence as a signal to perhaps reflect and consider how their military and foreign policies contribute to creating and strengthening the very things the west claim to be fighting against, the U.S. and U.K. turned their blame to Islam and religious ideology for the depravity and extreme violence used by some militants and groups. The west would rather deal with the symptoms of a problem they have contributed to creating rather than addressing their own role in the globalization of militancy and political violence. This concept of diverting attention away from yourself onto the other is glaringly clear in the debate around 'radicalization' and the policy that has been created to address it; "Countering Violent Extremism" or "CVE".

"RADICALIZATION" AND THE MILITANCY BOOMERANG

In the days and weeks leading up to the Iraq War, the U.K.'s Joint Intelligence Committee, a parliamentary body which oversees the U.K.'s intelligence agencies MI5, MI6, and GCHQ, issued a 'Top-Secret' judgment highlighting the consequences of invading Iraq. The report, now de-classified, noted:

"The threat from al-Qaeda will increase at the onset of any military action against Iraq. They will target Coalition forces and other Western interests in the Middle East. Attacks against Western interests elsewhere are also likely, especially in the U.S. and U.K., for maximum impact. The worldwide threat from other Islamist terrorist groups and individuals will increase significantly." (National Archives, 2003).

A year after the Iraq war, in 2004, another report produced jointly by the U.K.'s Foreign Office and the Home Office noted that British foreign policy was causing resentment and radicalization within Muslim communities and could lead to terrorism in the U.K. (Foreign & Commonwealth Office/Home Office, 2004).

On 7th July 2005, for the first time in U.K. history, four British-Muslim men boarded trains and buses in London during the morning rush-hour and detonated homemade explosive-laden backpacks they were carrying. This was the first suicide bombing to have been executed on U.K. soil in which 52 civilians were killed. What was remarkable about the attack is not that it was unprecedented in its method and style but that it had been predicted. But, rather than acknowledging the role that foreign policy and wars such as Iraq had played in the arrival of 'home-grown' militancy and political violence, the blame was placed on Islamic ideology. "Strip away their fake claims of grievance and see them for what they are", the Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed, "terrorists who use 21st century technology to fight a pre-medieval religious war" (Blair, 2005). Convinced that it was 'their' religious ideology rather than 'our' wars and foreign policies that had driven some people into executing political violence on the streets of the U.K., the government and its security establishment went into overdrive in trying to create and implement the 'Prevent' CVE policy.

DON'T MENTION THE WAR

The aim of the Prevent/CVE policy is to counter the ideology that 'radicalizes' young Muslims and drives them to become militants and engage in political violence. The thinking behind the policy is that if people can be spotted and profiled who

pose a potential militancy-risk by public sector workers such as teachers, doctors, and nurses, and reported to the authorities, the state will be able to launch some form of pre-emptive intervention that will stop violent attacks from happening before they are executed. The policy sounds reasonable but, in practice, it contains multiple problems.

First, the behavioral and ideological indicators it relies upon to determine if somebody poses a future terrorism risk are based on entirely legitimate, legal, and ordinary behaviors, activities, and beliefs. The policy therefore plays a role in constructing Muslims as a 'suspect community' and criminalizes Muslim identity. Secondly, the policy securitizes the domain of the public sector and converts public sector workers into extensions of the security and surveillance state. Since reporting potential terrorists to the authorities is a duty enshrined within British law, it also increases the risk of people being referred who have done nothing wrong since public sector workers oftentimes prefer to over-report than not report somebody and run the risk of falling foul of the law themselves. Thirdly, the piercing of the public sector, especially the health service, creates a situation whereby people cannot speak about their mental health issues, oftentimes triggered by state violence and fears around surveillance, in a safe and secure space; leading to an increase in social and political exclusion and inequality. And finally, the policy places the blame on religious and ideological belief systems rather than looking at the role that politics and war play in 'radicalization' of young Muslims and their militancy. The creation of Prevent, and CVE more broadly, addresses the symptoms of political violence undertaken by Muslim militants and armed groups; not the role the state, powerful governments, and their policies play.

There seems to be a broad consensus that

terrorism is not caused by religion and/or ideology but by a combination of socio-economic and political factors, including conflict and war. "Whilst religion can justify and intensify terrorist violence," observes Richard English (2009, p.39), "the point is that this does not occur in isolation from other social and political forces and factors." Religion and ideology, in other words, have an ability to justify and legitimize terrorism but they operate in conjunction with other socio-economic and political factors. This is similar to what the war-sociologist Sinisa Malesevic (2010, p.83) notes: "ideological power is not the only, and not necessarily the primary, generator of social action but its social significance lies in its legitimizing capacity." Again, ideology is not the cause of militancy. It is the justifier.

CONCLUSION

The view that religious ideology is the foundational driver of Muslim militancy and political violence around the world is a way of diverting attention away from the role that powerful western countries such as the U.S. and U.K. have contributed to the political upheaval and insecurity that have created the conditions that have significantly contributed to the emergence of groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is a way of distracting the attention of the world from the

fact that the depravity and torture used by groups such as ISIS oftentimes draws upon and mirrors the depravity and torture the U.S. has been employing since launching its Global War on Terror in 2001, and more specifically, the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

By refusing to look inward and reflecting on the role that western foreign policies and wars have played in the rise of Muslim militancy and political violence, it becomes inevitable that both will be

pathologized and seen as a mix of irrationality and evil rather than a symptom and outcome of state violence. Constructing and placing your enemy beyond the realm of reason, debate and negotiation makes conflict and confrontation the only solution since evil can never be negotiated with. It must be fought wherever it is found. Muslim militancy has a political and historical context to it but western policies and practices strip it of this context. They erase the contributing role that state terror and torture have played in its emergence and globalization. The most effective way for powerful western states such as the U.S. and U.K. to stop political violence, terror, and torture therefore, is to perhaps consider not using it.

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