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Iraq Is a Strategic Battleground in the War Against Terrorism

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Some who argue for an immediate pullout from Iraq call the war in Iraq a distraction from the broader war on terrorism. This argument ignores the fact that al-Qaeda has taken root in Iraq and massacres Iraqi civilians, government forces, and coalition forces on a daily basis. As President Bush recently noted, Osama bin Laden recognizes the importance of Iraq, where, he proclaimed, the “third world war is raging.” Abandoning the Iraqi government before it is able to provide for its own security would leave Iraq, its neighbors, and the United States more vulnerable to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Whatever the disagreements over the relationship between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein’s regime are, Iraq today is a strategically vital front in the war on terrorism.

Al-Qaeda’s Strategy

Al-Qaeda leaders have proclaimed Iraq a major front in their global terrorist campaign. This was made clear in a July 9, 2005, letter from Osama bin Laden’s chief lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to Abu Musab Zarqawi, who was then leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The letter was intercepted by coalition forces and subsequently published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which expressed the “highest confidence” in its authenticity. In the letter, Zawahiri underscored the centrality of the war in Iraq for the global jihad:

I want to be the first to congratulate you for what God has blessed you with in terms of fighting battle in the heart of the Islamic world, which was formerly the field for

major battles in Islam’s history, and what is now the place for the greatest battle of Islam in this era...

Zawahiri cautioned Zarqawi to avoid the mistake that the Taliban made in Afghanistan of alienating the Afghan people, who joined the opposition and cooperated with U.S. forces to overthrow the Taliban. He reminded Zarqawi that al-Qaeda needs some semblance of popular support to realize its plans for Iraq once American forces are driven out:

The first stage: Expel the Americans from Iraq.

The second stage: Establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate- over as much territory as you can to spread its power in Iraq, i.e., in Sunni areas, is in order to fill the void stemming from the departure of the Americans, immediately upon their exit and before un-Islamic forces attempt to fill this void, whether those whom the Americans will leave behind them, or those among the un-Islamic forces who will try to jump at taking power.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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There is no doubt that this emirate will enter into a fierce struggle with the foreign infidel forces, and those supporting them among the local forces, to put it in a state of constant preoccupation with defending itself, to make it impossible for it to establish a stable state which could proclaim a caliphate, and to keep the Jihadist groups in a constant state of war, until these forces find a chance to annihilate them.

The third stage: Extend the jihad wave to the secular countries neighboring Iraq.

The fourth stage: It may coincide with what came before: the clash with Israel, because Israel was established only to challenge any new Islamic entity.

Al-Qaeda's strategy is clear. It seeks to carve out a state-within-a-state in Iraq to use as a springboard for exporting terrorism and subversion. Iraq looms much larger in al-Qaeda's plans than Afghanistan because of its strategic location in the heart of the Arab world; Iraq's close proximity to the Persian Gulf oil fields, a high-value target for attack; Iraq's usefulness as a staging area for attacks on neighboring countries and Israel; and the fact that Baghdad was once the seat of the caliphate that al-Qaeda seeks to recreate. As an Arab-dominated movement, al-Qaeda would have a much easier time operating from bases in Sunni Arab regions in Iraq than in Afghanistan or Pakistan, where Arab travelers stand out from the local population.

Bin Laden quickly grasped that Iraq was a more important front than Afghanistan in his global jihad and ordered many al-Qaeda forces to move there from Afghanistan in 2003. According to

Taliban sources cited by *Newsweek*, bin Laden sent emissaries to meet with Taliban leaders in November 2003 to inform them that al-Qaeda was shifting resources and men from Afghanistan to Iraq.

In view of the high priority that al-Qaeda accords to Iraq, the U.S. cannot discount Iraq's importance in the global struggle against terrorism. Premature withdrawal from Iraq would demoralize the Iraqi government, tempt Iraqi officials to strike deals with insurgents or defect to the insurgency, and embolden al-Qaeda and other Islamic militants to escalate their terrorist campaign using Iraq as a sanctuary.

Towards Stability

The United States cannot afford to leave a power vacuum in Iraq. This would be a historic mistake, similar to the abandonment of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal that allowed the Taliban to seize control and export terrorism around the world. The Bush Administration therefore is right to continue to help the Iraqis build a government that can defeat the insurgents and become an ally against terrorists, rather than a supporter of terrorism, as was Saddam's regime. If the U.S. abandons Iraq, it will become the next Afghanistan—a major source of terrorism, subversion, and warfare for decades to come. As General John Abizaid, the top commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, recently warned, "If we leave, they will follow us."

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