

The Value of the Iraq War to the Al-Qaida Movement

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1. This note examines the value of the Iraq conflict to the al-Qaida movement, bearing in mind Britain's heavy involvement in the country and HMG's close relationship with the George W Bush administration. Unlike many US commentators, it does not see the Iraqi insurgency as primarily an al-Qaida operation, but does conclude that Iraq provides a crucial platform for the movement, especially when the timescales in which it is operating are understood.
2. The al-Qaida movement is a dispersed and very broadly based phenomenon that avoids a narrowly hierarchical structure but does have clear aims and intentions. Far from being a nihilistic collection of insane extremists, even if that impression is frequently given by opponents, it is a rational movement involving a combination of revolutionary political fervour rooted, unusually, in a fundamentalist orientation of a major religion – Islam - rather than in a specific political ideology or nationalism.
3. It has a series of short-term aims and one over-riding long-term intention.
4. Among the former is the eviction of foreign forces from the Islamic world. A further core aim is the replacement of the House of Saud by a "genuine" Islamist regime, the Saudi royal family being seen as corrupt, elitist and excessively linked to the United States.
5. Further short-term aims are the replacement of other corrupt, elitist and pro-western regimes across the region, with an initial focus on Egypt and Pakistan but extending to Iraq and Afghanistan. Support is offered to other Islamist movements such as the Chechen rebels and the Southern Thailand separatists. Finally there is a deep antagonism to the state of Israel and support for the Palestinian cause.
6. Beyond these aims lies the intention of establishing a pan-Islamic Caliphate, developing in the Middle East but extending eventually to other parts of the world.
7. There is a broad distinction between the "near enemy", which comprises the unacceptable regimes and their supporters across the Middle East, and the "far enemy" of the United States and its coalition partners such as the United Kingdom.

8. A further core aspect of the strategy of the movement is the matter of timescales. The short-term aims are seen as being achieved progressively over a period of several decades and the long-term aim of establishing Islamist governance through a Caliphate may take fifty to a hundred years. This is a fundamental issue as it differs so markedly from the typical timescales of western political and economic institutions.
9. Even so, the movement will point to several recent achievements, including the closure of all US military bases from Saudi Arabia and the continuing conflict in Afghanistan. Although connections between Hamas and al-Qaida are minimal, and most Palestinians eschew support they might get from the movement, the current Hamas control of Gaza may well be presented by the movement as an indicator of the potential of radical Islam.
10. To succeed in its substantive aims the al-Qaida movement requires very substantial cadres of dedicated followers, the most important practical attributes being a range of abilities and experiences that are appropriate to the task of terminating the regimes of the near enemy.
11. Many of the original paramilitary supporters of the movement gained such experience against poorly trained if heavily armed Soviet troops in 1980s Afghanistan and there may well have been a hope that the main US response to 9/11 would have been a new foreign occupation of the country, setting in process a lengthy guerrilla war.
12. This would have held out the prospect of crippling a second superpower as well as of training new cadres of paramilitaries. US forces did not respond in that manner initially, relying heavily on the Northern Alliance to provide ground forces.
13. However, Afghanistan is now progressively serving that role for Taliban/al-Qaida militias, not just in opposing the United States but NATO as a whole.
14. **Even so, Afghanistan is now far less significant for the al-Qaida movement than Iraq. The immense value of the American occupation of Iraq to al-Qaida is that it is providing a remarkably effective jihadist combat training zone for a substantial new generation of paramilitaries.**
15. Moreover, this is combat training that has three advantages over the Afghanistan of the 1980s.
 - It is training against the world's most heavily armed and best-equipped forces, the US Army and Marine Corps supported by the

US Air Force and Navy. All of the weapons and equipment that could be brought to bear by the US military, often advised by Israeli Defence Force personnel, are being used. Up-armoured vehicles, the latest light arms, mortar and sniper detection radar, aerial and satellite-based reconnaissance, precision-guided munitions, area-impact weapons and everything else are all available.

- The Iraq War is primarily an urban guerrilla war and is therefore similar to the kinds of conflicts that the al-Qaida movement will want to conduct against other regimes of the near enemy in the region. This is far superior to the Afghanistan experience which was more rural in context.
- The war is being conducted in the glare of 24-hour TV news coverage by the new generation of stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. There is constant reporting of the civilian casualties at a level and with a detail that is foreign to the media outlets in Europe, let alone the United States.

16. From the perspective of the al-Qaida movement, Iraq is a quite unexpected bonus and is going to provide benefits that are likely to last for decades.

17. It is for this reason that the recent indications from Washington of a very long-term presence in Iraq are so welcome to the movement. Although there have been many suggestions that the United States has had long-term plans for a military presence in Iraq since the start of the war four years ago, there have been as many denials. What the Bush administration has done, perhaps belatedly, is to be substantially more transparent about its aims and its deep-rooted belief in the enduring importance of the Iraq operation.

18. Perhaps the most significant aspect of all of this is the extraordinary lack of understanding within the Bush administration of the impact of its policies in Iraq. For the administration and its supporters, it is utterly reasonable that the United States should occupy Iraq and maintain a singularly powerful commitment there for as long as the region's resources are important. It is a legitimate defence of interests by the world's quintessential civilising power – the guardian of democracy and freedom and the defender against rampant and highly dangerous Islamofascism.

19. There is simply no recognition that the view from across the Middle East, and indeed in large parts of the majority world, is of a form of overt imperialism backed up by the rigorous and uncompromising use of military force that has already resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people.

20. For al-Qaida and its associates it is an assault on Islam which will greatly assist their aims by encouraging many forms of support but, far more importantly, by providing Iraq as an unrivalled training zone for paramilitary recruits.

21. That, regrettably, will remain the case until there is a major reassessment in Washington. Given the divisions within the Democrats this does not seem immediately likely. Britain could and should endeavour to have some influence but even that would require a much more illuminated understanding of the predicament in which the United States finds itself than is currently evident within HMG.