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There is an understandable reluctance to recognize that the Iraq war has served as a recruitment poster for Al Qaeda and for the Iraqi insurgency. The global network of Islamist terrorists, and its seldom-mentioned support group, have been energized by events in Iraq. The war has turned Iraq into the world's most effective terrorist training camp.

Iraq today increasingly resembles Lebanon shortly before that country descended into a 15-year civil war in 1975. Iraq has also become an incubator for a particularly noxious form of Shiite radicalism, one that could turn against those who liberated them from Saddam Hussein's bloody tyranny.

Osama Bin Laden is one of the principal beneficiaries of the Iraqi crisis. What is widely seen throughout the world as unprovoked American aggression against Iraq, and the mistreatment of Iraqi civilians, have radicalized many in the Arab world and elevated Bin Laden from a fringe figure to a global leader opposed to American hegemony in the Middle East.

As erroneous as this portrayal strikes us in the United States, it is nonetheless believed by countless millions from Berlin to Bangladesh and from Mexico to Malaysia. Perception long ago supplanted reality.

Bin Laden's stated geopolitical objective is to bleed the United States into bankruptcy the way the mujahideen guerrillas in Afghanistan bled the Soviet Union into bankruptcy in 1989. He is convinced the Afghan Arabs he recruited played the key role in collapsing the Soviet empire. The last Soviet soldier evacuated Afghanistan Feb. 15, 1989. The Berlin Wall crumbled Nov. 9, 1989, less than nine months later.

For Bin Laden, Iraq was a signal from Allah. It became an unexpected opportunity to bleed the U.S. economically, militarily, and diplomatically, and to paint the superpower as reckless and aggressive.

The degree to which this global struggle is still misunderstood and miscast becomes clear each time we hear that “we have to fight them over there so they don’t come over here.”

In Europe, in countries that have been members of NATO since the beginning of the Cold War, would-be jihadis continue to volunteer to fight in Iraq. An unknown number have already returned from Iraq with new terrorist skills and the ability to form sleeper cells and encourage others to sign up for jihad.

An Islamic underclass is developing across Europe that is increasingly in tune with the extremist ideologies – Wahhabi and Salafist – of radical Islam. France’s prison population is already 60% Muslim.

Europe’s large Muslim communities – with a total population of almost 20 million – offer support networks in which returning jihadis from Iraq can blend with little difficulty. Also, they have the protection of several layers of insulation between themselves and the intelligence agencies assigned to track them down.

When French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin was Interior Minister he asked for an intelligence assessment of what was happening in France’s 1,000 principal mosques. It turned out that only three percent of the imams preaching in France were French citizens and 40% of them had no religious background whatsoever. They preached with material they were getting from pro-Al Qaeda websites.

This week’s TIME magazine has a lengthy article on what it calls “Generation Jihad” – restive, rootless young European-born Muslims who find themselves alienated from their societies and the policies of their governments.

A study of 1,160 recent French converts to Islam found that 23% of them identified themselves as Salafists – a Muslim sect associated with violent extremism. In the Netherlands, Dutch intelligence believes as many as 20 different hard-line Islamic groups are operating in the

country. And in London, authorities believe as many as 3,000 veterans of Al Qaeda training camps over the years were born or based in Britain.

Unlike the United States and Canada, where most immigrants from Muslim countries are scattered throughout society in relatively small groups, Muslim communities in Europe exist in large concentrations, usually in the poorer suburbs of major cities.

In addition, Europe has long been a destination of choice for dissident Muslim activists and militants from the Middle East and South Asia. Some of these dissidents provided the benefit of their experiences and contacts to new generations of jihadists.

Until early 2004, the jihadists flourished in the European environment and refrained from attacks against U.S. allies except to put their network at the disposal of those planning these attacks.

The 1996 terrorist operation against the U.S. military at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, and the USS Cole in Aden in Oct. 2000, were all major attacks, but they failed to achieve any real impact on U.S. policy.

This is what led to Al Qaeda's conclusion that only large scale attacks targeting civilians in the heart and lungs of America could demonstrate that the world's only superpower was vulnerable`.

This, of course, led to 9/11, which triggered the invasion and liberation of Afghanistan, which Bin Laden, from all accounts, had not anticipated. The great big kick in the terrorist hornet's nest scattered Al Qaeda's Afghan-based resources to many different parts of the world – the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Sahara Africa, even Latin America, and, of course, Europe, from the Balkans to Scandinavia.

I recently toured six African countries with NATO Supreme Commander Gen. James L. Jones who is also commander of all American forces in Europe and whose command encompasses 91 countries, including most of Africa. Each head of state and chiefs of intelligence, security and defense talked about the proliferation of Al

Qaeda-type cells in the failed or failing states of Africa, particularly those with large Muslim populations, such as Nigeria.

The Pan-Sahel region of Africa offers sanctuary to Islamist extremists, smugglers and insurgent groups. Coastal areas provide havens for smuggling, piracy, and oil bunkering. Vast expanses are ungoverned or ungovernable. As much of Afghanistan was under Taliban rule, which enabled Al Qaeda to set up its training camps, the same phenomenon is now taking root in some parts of Africa.

The U.S. presently gets 17% of its fuel supplies from West Africa and Angola. This will soon rise to 21% and then 40% by 2020. These are the only oil producers outside of the Americas that have direct access to U.S. ports without having to squeeze through choke points, such as the Strait of Hormuz.

Social and economic problems are driving chronic instability, inhibiting economic development and squandering human capital, which lead to failing states and fertile ground for extremism. Twenty-five percent of some 400 foreign fighters captured in Iraq came from Africa.

As a result of 9/11, America became a much harsher environment for militant Islamists, and Europe offered networks and operatives already in place. Which led to Madrid on March 11, 2004, and London last July 7 and 21.

Now Britain, Italy and Germany are enacting much tougher anti-terrorist laws. France already had them in place. This new legal climate is bound to impact jihadi plans. Hence, my belief Al Qaeda will now aim at soft targets that could still bring the world economy to a jarring – if only temporary – halt.

Many experts believe Al Qaeda is waiting for a period of momentary U.S. weakness – such as the twin drains of Katrina and Rita on top of Iraq – to inflict a CBRN attack on the U.S. In the light of the immediate post-Katrina chaos, they must have determined we are not prepared to deal with a CBRN catastrophe, such as the explosion of a so-called dirty bomb in lower Manhattan, or an unsuspecting smaller city in the Middle West.

There is no doubt in my mind they would attempt it if they had the capability.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies first warned about cyberterrorism in a report published in 1997. Long before 9/11, Al Qaeda was using the Internet to plan and execute its 1998 attacks against U.S. Embassies in Africa and the bombing of the USS Cole two years later.

Today, there exists a “virtual caliphate” in cyberspace. Some 4,000 plus pro-Al Qaeda websites, chat rooms, message boards with seemingly innocuous coded messages, coupled with state-of-the-art encryption techniques reflect the sizeable number of computer engineers and scientists at the service of transnational terrorism.

In his book “SMART MOBS,” the Internet visionary Howard Rheingold says mobile phones will soon morph into tiny multimedia terminals, the kind of disruptive technology that changes every aspect of society, including intelligence and counter-intelligence. This new era, says Rheingold, will enable “people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before.” Al Qaeda’s computer-literate terrorist geeks were among the first to get there.

Untraceable e-mails organize terrorists across continents. Jihadi recruits use the Internet to learn how to make bombs from store-bought chemicals; learn also the names of mosques in Syria and Jordan that can hide and protect a jihadi on his way into Iraq; and to learn different locations in Iraq where jihadis should report for duty.

The world of on-line jihadism is not something imaginary, theoretical or conceptual – it is here and it is real. The caliphate’s many fanatics, participants, and supporters toil toward the day when the removal of secular Arab leaders in the Middle East and beyond transforms the virtual caliphate into a political reality.

Many intelligence analysts are puzzled by Osama Bin Laden’s popularity in the Muslim world. But I can remember when millions of Europeans – and some Americans – pledged allegiance to Joseph Stalin, history’s most murderous dictator, with the blood of some 40 million victims on his hands.

In the 1930s, a group of Oxford University students pledged that under no circumstances would they fight to save England. And both Oxford and Cambridge were the pre-World War II recruiting grounds for some of the most notorious Soviet spies in the U.S. after the war.

Between the end of World War II in 1945 and Stalin's death in 1953, Communist parties in France and Italy, blindly loyal to the Kremlin, consistently garnered 25% of the electoral vote. In 1948, the Italian Communist Party would have won the elections and taken over the government if the United States had not covertly bankrolled anti-Communist parties.

Before World War II, in the 1930s, which I can well remember, large numbers of Europeans, embittered by the fallout of the Great Depression and the apparent weakness of democratic leaders, succumbed to the totalitarian temptation of extreme left and extreme right. Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini enjoyed fanatical followers throughout Europe – witness the two sides in the Spanish civil war when one million were killed in the run-up to World War II.

Today, Bin Laden, and Islamo-fascism, are experiencing the same surge of popularity. At the beginning of the 20th century, no one had ever heard of Nazism or fascism, and a Communist was simply a socialist without a sense of humor.

At the beginning of the 21st century, or five years ago, no one had ever heard of the new ideology Al Qaeda-ism. What used to be a small, tight-knit group of terrorists is now a global politico-religious, ideological, spiritual movement that recruits and trains extremists in many of the same spawning grounds used by Communist parties the world over during the Cold War.

Disenfranchised, unemployed Muslim youth, living in the poorer neighborhoods of major European cities, heavily influenced by propaganda depicting the U.S. and Israel on a crusade against Islam, are easy pickings.

The Jihadists' notion of a Pan-Islamic Ummah, or nation, as explained by Olivier Roy, one of Europe's leading scholars of modern Islamism,

recalls the Trotskyist idea of the proletariat: namely an imaginary and therefore silent community that gives legitimacy to the small group pretending to speak in its name. The triumph of Islam is then held to be, as the triumph of socialism once was, “inevitable.”

The extent of the real danger posed by jihadi extremists is political, in which terror is not an end in itself. The broader aims of these organizations are not significantly different from those of Lenin and the Bolsheviks 100 years ago or Hitler and the German National Socialist party 80 years ago.

The aim this time is to establish some form of regime or regimes steeped in the teachings of radical Islam with access to Saudi money and one quarter of the world’s oil reserves and Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal – with the broader objective of spreading their religion worldwide.

Gen. Hamid Gul, a former head of Pakistani intelligence, who hates America with a passion, is “strategic adviser” to the six-party coalition of politico-religious extremists that governs two of Pakistan’s four provinces. He described the caliphate to me quite bluntly: Saudi oil and Pakistani nukes levels the playing field with the United States. Gul is also close to Pakistan’s popular hero, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of his country’s nuclear capability, who ran an international nuclear black market for the benefit of America’s enemies – North Korea, Iran and Libya.

The U.S. relationships with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are critical. Pervez Musharraf presides over a country where the overwhelming majority of people regard Bin Laden trustworthier than George W. Bush. Musharraf, as Army chief of staff, constantly seeks to defuse U.S. pressure to act and domestic pressure to avoid acting.

Earlier this month, I was in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province and in Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Responding to U.S. pressure, Musharraf ordered the deployment of 80,000 troops along a 1,300-mile unmarked border of mountains and flatlands with Afghanistan. Several hundred Pakistani soldiers have been killed or wounded in anti-Al Qaeda operations. But Taliban guerrillas who go back and forth to harass U.S. forces are left unmolested.

Resistance to U.S. influence has been both passive and active with Pakistani intelligence agents telling local police and village chiefs not to cooperate with any U.S. unit that crosses into Pakistan. Ranking members of Pakistan's militant Islamist movements have been declared off-limits to security forces, thus leaving key segments of the international militant network unmolested.

From time to time, responding to U.S. pressure, Gen. Musharraf orders offensives against militant extremists. But calculated moves by influential figures at the middle and lower echelons of Pakistan's intelligence and security apparatus manage to blunt the impact of the orders.

Some of these countermoves reflect Islamabad's resentment against American attempts to push the limits of security agreements with the Pakistanis. However, it is also an indication that Musharraf's regime does not have tight control over its own intelligence and security services. For some, it comes down to sheer survival. Islamist militants – Musharraf himself estimates their number at 1.5 million, or 1% of the population – have made several attempts on the president's life.

For Islamabad, jihadists have long been both an internal threat to military/civilian rule as well as a useful form of leverage in its traditional geopolitical objectives, e.g., gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan and waging its proxy war against India in Kashmir (now on hold).

Despite constant U.S. pressure and \$130 million in U.S. funding for the reform of single discipline, boys only madrassas, where only Arabic and the Koran are taught, along with multiple reasons to hate America, Israel and India, very little has been done. Since the mid-1980s, almost ten million young men, including the entire Taliban leadership, have graduated from these free schools, financed mostly by Saudi Arabia and Libya.

The politico-religious parties control some 12,500 madrassas. This month they finally dropped their opposition to a government order to register the schools by the end of this year. In return, the government agreed not to expel the foreign students that attend them.

There is a recognition in Islamabad among present and former ranking government officials, albeit off the record, that Pakistan's importance as a "major non-NATO ally" likely will gradually dissolve if Bin Laden is killed or captured. As the Bush Administration strengthens its new strategic ties with India, these Pakistani officials say, Musharraf's geopolitical importance to the U.S. is bound to diminish.

So the outlook is uncertain on many critical fronts. What is clear is that we are facing a long protracted ideological conflict that could last for several decades, or at least until Islam is persuaded by a latter-day Martin Luther, or a Martin Luther King, that modernity is the better part of valor.

The stakes are enormous, which is what prompted the retiring chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Richard Myers, to say this week that defeating the Iraqi insurgency is as important to the United States as winning World War II. The defeat in Vietnam did not have any dire geopolitical consequences. Our Cold War opponents were themselves defeated in the end. But a full-fledged civil war in Iraq would leave us little choice but to withdraw.

The police chief in Basra, Iraq's second largest city, told an interviewer last week he could only count of the loyalty of one policeman out of four. The other three, he said, owed their allegiance to Shia militia funded by Iran. In Baghdad, government officials have admitted that Saddam loyalists had also penetrated the ranks of the national army, security police and intelligence service. Al Qaeda in Iraq, meanwhile, has officially declared all-out war against Iraq's Shiites.

We quickly forget there are Imams in Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States, Egypt, Jordan and Syria who preach every Friday it is a Muslim's sacred duty to resist the Americans in Iraq.

Wherever one scans the geopolitical horizon, much turmoil clearly lies ahead as the forces of nationalism, fundamentalism, globalism – and, increasingly transnationalism – sort themselves out.

In order to prevail in this global struggle, we must adopt comprehensive – and not narrow – solutions to the major problems facing us. That

means, for example, we must move decisively to resolve the profoundly difficult conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Gaza was but one small step on that road. A viable Palestinian state has to be midwived by the U.S. without further delays. If this proves impossible, and Intifada III breaks out over the West Bank, this crisis, coupled with an ongoing insurgency in Iraq, could spell geopolitical disaster for the U.S.

If a radical government emerges in Baghdad, either because we falter in the effort to democratize, or because Iraq falls into terrorist chaos, the entire Islamic world will find itself in turmoil. Countries with substantial Islamic minorities, such as India, Russia and the Philippines, will become embroiled in the chaos, as would European countries with large Muslim communities.

There is no magic bullet called democracy. What took several centuries to evolve in Europe – from the Reformation to the Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Discovery to democratic capitalism – cannot be transplanted in countries that have known nothing but dictatorship, authoritarian regimes and/or absolute monarchies. Turkey is the exception that proves the rule – and Turkey's democracy was imposed by dictatorial edict.

Veteran geopolitical luminaries have pointed out time and again that the war on terror is a misnomer. Terrorism is a weapons system. From time immemorial it has been the weapon of the weak against the strong. The real war on terror is about culture, ideas, and perceptions as much as roadside bombs and suicide bombers.

Al Qaeda's breeding grounds stretch from the madrassas of Mindanao in the Philippines to identical Koranic schools in Indonesia and Pakistan, to the shantytowns on the outskirts of Casablanca. Everyone now seems to have access at the village level to 24/7 satellite television. Mullahs and imams tell their illiterate flocks they are poor because of what the heathen Christians and Jews have stolen from them in their war to destroy Islam.

Three years in to Operation Iraqi Freedom, anti-Americanism is now deeply entrenched in much of the world, so much so that in 14 of 16 countries polled in a new Pew Foundation survey, China is now viewed more favorably than the U.S., even among traditional U.S. allies in

Europe. The U.S. is more isolated than ever before in history, with more people in public polls in Muslim countries voting for Bin Laden than President Bush. Nowhere does a majority believe the war in Iraq has made the world safer.

The damage done by the Abu Ghraib pictures – used as anti-American posters the world over – is incalculable. Unfortunately for all of us, the world we project through satellite TV is one of sitcoms and risqué one-man talk shows that are seen as depraved in a Muslim household. One hears time and again from friends in those countries that we have long lost our moral compass and the moral high ground. Lecturing the Islamic world on American values rings both hollow and shallow when filtered through global television.

Before we can readjust our sights and recalibrate our strategy, we should consult those who do not agree with us, but who have had long experience in dealing with transnational terrorism. This should be a time for listening carefully to current and former officials whose countries have been victims and who abhor Islamist extremism as much as we do.

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