Can Israel Learn from U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

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As a shocked Israel prepared to respond to the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attack, the most devastating in Israel's history, U.S. president Joe Biden offered some sober advice: "After 9/11, we were enraged in the United States. And while we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes." Looking back at the U.S. wars on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, Biden, along with many American strategists, urged Israel to heed the lessons the United States won so dearly and avoid the many mistakes made along the way.²

Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq are extensive and still being compiled, but how relevant are they to Israel’s situation with Hamas?³ As might be expected, some apply more than others, and a few do not apply at all.

The U.S. counterinsurgency model, as embodied in documents like Joint Publication 3-24, Counterinsurgency, stresses the political side of counterinsurgency.⁴ In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States focused largely on defeating Saddam Hussein’s regime and the Taliban but less on what should replace them, resulting in sustained—and, in the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan, successful—insurgencies. Establishing a legitimate and competent government after military victory is vital, as this ensures support from the people and allows law enforcement and social services to function.⁵ All this requires empowering local partners, who will bear the brunt of the fighting. In Afghanistan, the United States lost 2,443 troops, while the Afghan military lost at least 66,000, to say nothing of the tens of thousands of Afghan civilian casualties.⁶ Strong local partners and successful governance, in turn, ensure popular support. As Chinese leader Mao Zedong famously argued, the guerrillas must swim in the sea of the people, and if the people are against the guerrillas, then their end is certain.⁷

In the aftermath of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States now prefers to avoid long wars and accept that some level of risk is inevitable.⁸ The U.S. preference is to conduct shorter counterterrorism-focused efforts rather than grinding occupations

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that require decades of effort. When sustained insurgencies must be fought, the United States seeks to work with local governments, warlords, or other partners, supporting them with training and, at times, airstrikes or other limited military support.\(^9\)

Some of these lessons are applicable to Israel’s current war with Hamas. Most importantly, Israel must develop a long-term political strategy for Gaza. As Raphael Cohen has argued, the current situation has grown, in part, out of Israel’s decades-long failed strategy of “mowing the grass” in Gaza—which attempted to both contain and deter Hamas in Gaza, while simultaneously not addressing any of the underlying economic and political conditions that had helped bring Hamas into power and keep it there.\(^10\)

Israel, however, faces a different challenge in Gaza than the United States did in Iraq or Afghanistan—in many ways, a much harder one. Geography poses the first problem. Gaza is on Israel’s doorstep, while the United States has the luxury of distance. What happened in Baghdad or Kabul did not pose an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland. Israel cannot wash its hands of Gaza as the United States eventually did with Afghanistan.

Historically, Israel has had a less solutionist approach than the United States. It sees Palestinian hatred as almost inevitable, and the Second Intifada and the 2005 Gaza withdrawal proved to many Israelis that concessions to Palestinian leaders would be met with violence (though the truth is far more complex).\(^11\) The latest Hamas attack, made in the aftermath of what Israel saw as an accommodating approach to Hamas in Gaza, will reinforce this view. Thus, Israelis believe a political approach designed to win over the Palestinian people is doomed to fail.\(^12\)

Israel also lacks local partners who might govern Gaza and serve Israeli interests. In Afghanistan and Iraq, numerous local leaders sought to work with the United States against the insurgents (even as they were often critical of U.S. policies), and they had genuine support among many communities in these countries.\(^13\) Israel will find few, if any, Palestinians willing to work with it, in part because its policies have steadily undermined the more pro-peace Palestinian Authority, convincing many Palestinians that Israel will respond only to force.

Finally, Israel must engage in military operations in a saturated media environment, with widespread transparency regarding civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure in Gaza, and other horrors of war. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the battlefields were remote, and much of the fighting occurred when social media was in its infancy. Now the genuine destructiveness of the Israeli response (worsened by widespread misinformation) is there for all to see, eroding international support for Israel, including in the United States.\(^14\)

Biden and other U.S. leaders are right to urge caution on Israel and to encourage Israeli security officials to understand what the United States has learned in its various wars on terrorism. But the Israeli war on Hamas has its own characteristics, many of which are far more difficult than what the United States faced in Afghanistan or Iraq. As a result, Israel will learn its own lessons—and make its own mistakes.

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