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Center for Strategic and International Studies
1800 K Street N.W.
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 775-3270
(To comment: Acordesman@aol.com
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If We Fight Iraq: The Lessons of the Fighting in Afghanistan

Anthony H. Cordesman
Arleigh A. Burke Chair for Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies

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It may be premature to draw lessons from the Afghan conflict, but a number of efforts are already underway to argue that our experience in Afghanistan is a model of what would happen in a war in Iraq. Any effort to draw such lessons needs to be caveated very carefully. There are many differences between the political and military situation in the two cases. At the same time, the similarities are as much an argument for caution as for action.

It is important to remember just how different the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq are in a number of important ways:

- The Taliban was never a real state. The Taliban was a relatively small, Pakistani-backed force that exploded into a self-destructive power vacuum. Never had to have modern military forces. Shallow, half developed tyranny.
- Iraq is a real state. Saddam Hussein's regime is an enduring, relatively modern tyranny with modern military forces that has survived eight years of war with Iran and more than a decade of sanctions.
- The Taliban and Al Qaida had virtually no air force, no real modern surface-to-air missile defense system. They had a core military strength of only around 25,000 real troops, plus several hundred tanks and other armored vehicles. Their largest armored units were effectively reinforced battalions.
- Iraq is still a force of over 400,000 actives, 2,200 tanks, and 8,000 other armored vehicles. Iraq has six-seven heavy division equivalents. It has an air force of over 300 operational combat aircraft, and a significant, battle experienced, surface-to-air missile force.
- The Taliban faced significant armed opposition relative to its total strength. There were some 7,000-12,000 fighters in Northern Alliance. They were Russian-backed, and had armored and artillery forces. There were experienced, if largely disarmed, militia forces in hostile ethnic areas.

- The Iraqi opposition talks as if it had military capability but does not really have it. The INC and INA are hollow shells. The Kurds do a bad job even of fighting fellow Kurds. The Hakim faction in the south has some residual capability, but the Shi'ites are largely defeated and never had much military capability.
- Al Qaida examined weapons of mass destruction at low levels, but there is no evidence that it succeeded in actually weaponizing any form of chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) device. It certainly did not create large-scale capabilities.
- Iraq's residual CBRN capabilities are extensive. Defector reports of nuclear devices are probably exaggerated but possible. It is likely that Iraq has significant capability to rapidly weaponize large amounts of highly lethal biological agents, if it has not already done so. It can produce chemical weapons, and probably retains some ability to assemble and fire Scud missile variants.

At the same time, pre-war Afghanistan and today's Iraq have some important similarities:

- Both countries are deeply ethnically divided. A majority of the population in both countries has had reason to resent the regime and sometimes to hate it.
- Large areas of both countries are dominated by ethnic groups that have little reason to be loyal to the regime if there is a valid and more desirable alternative.
- Ethnic groups have significant territorial sanctuaries in both countries, although the Kurdish enclave had not really had to defend itself and has profited in some ways from its relations with Saddam's regime.
- Both regimes are classic tyrannies. Saddam now has the resources to offer carrots as well as sticks. Significant numbers of the more secular Shi'ites support him as well as Sunnis. He had played the same religion card as the Taliban -- although in a very different way. He also has largely succeeded in transferring the blame for the

hardships caused by war and sanctions to the West and the US. Nevertheless, his regime has the inherent vulnerability of all elitist dictatorships.

- For all of Iraq's military strengths in numbers, it too is dependent on obsolescent or obsolete weapons and military technology. Sanctions have succeeded in denying Iraq any major import of modern arms or military technology and most of its military equipment is now badly battle worn.
- The Taliban's military manpower was much more impressive on paper than on the battlefield. Large numbers of its units were only as loyal as necessity, dependence on the Taliban for money and arms, or opportunity made them. Iraq's situation is similar. Roughly 20-25% of Iraq's total manpower is reservist. At least another 40-45% consists of conscripts. At least 1-2 division equivalents of the combat elements of its 6-7 heavy division equivalents have limited to low-grade training and readiness at any given time. Its 12 infantry division equivalents are largely useful as static defensive troops. Its Special Republican Guards brigade, 10 commando brigades, and two Special Forces brigades do, however, give it significant capability for urban and non-conventional warfare.
- Both countries are relatively large, but terrain factors channel much of the population into a relatively limited number of urban areas. Like the Taliban, pro-Saddam forces cannot take to the hills or any other part of Iraq and carry out sustained warfare because they do not have sufficient popular support. Unlike Afghanistan, the Iraqis supporting the regime also have little experience with any form of guerrilla warfare.
- Both countries have a history of rapid shifts in popular support depending on military circumstances. Afghan factions go where the power and money is. The Shi'ites and Kurds have had significant uprisings against the regime for political and ethnic reasons. Even many of those now loyal to the Iraqi regime may change sides when they see its defeat is inevitable.

One key problem in judging how any lessons from the Afghan conflict would apply to a conflict with Iraq lies in the fact that many of Iraq's most important potential

weaknesses are intangible. Anyone can assert that the regime is hated and weak and ethnic resistance is pent up and strong. Anyone can assert that there are grave divisions within Iraq's military forces and they might defect or divide. The problem is in proving it or in being able to act upon such weaknesses as if they were predictable enough to determine strategy and tactics.

This same level of uncertainty about "intangibles" existed in Afghanistan. It looked like a long, difficult war, given the Taliban's pre-war strength and the weakness of the opposition. The key uncertainty was always how loyal or hostile each major ethnic group would be to the Taliban and Al Qaida and the catalytic collapse of the Taliban certainly occurred as much for political and ethnic reasons, as well as military ones. This illustrates how critical such "intangibles" can be in war.

There is, however, no clear evidence to show that Iraq's regime is this fragile. There are strong counter-arguments to be made based on Saddam's past survival, improved ability to buy support and pay off elites, and decade-long experience in purging its enemies. Iraq is also a highly nationalist state educated to resent and hate the West and treat its southern neighbors as traitors to the Arab cause. The only way to find out how fragile Iraq really is to go to war.

Given these comparisons, and the history of the Afghan War, what lessons are there for the US?

One key lesson is not to count on "intangibles." They worked for the US in Afghanistan in most ways; they may not in Iraq. As a result, the US must take every possible political and diplomatic step to prepare for any war, and it must meet certain conditions.

- If the US goes to war with Iraq it should seek to exploit Iraq's divisions and the weaknesses of its leadership, but it should not count upon them. The US should go to war with decisive force and the ability to win with or without the support of intangibles.

- The US should not rely on fantasies about the capabilities of a weak and ineffective outside opposition or instant uprisings and major military defections.
- The US should work with its allies to offer major incentives to movements inside Iraq to split from Saddam. These should include a major easing of sanctions once inspection is completed and transparency is established. They should include quick recognition of any regime that emerges without any of Saddam's core elite, relief from reparations and pre-war debt, and support in rebuilding the nation.
- The US should internationalize the nation building and peacekeeping effort from the start. Make it clear that the US will not be an occupying force, that a UN force with Islamic elements will be available when the fighting is over, that Iraqi defectors will be supported in forming a government, and that the US will support Iraq's territorial integrity based on proper rights for its Kurds and Shi'ites as well as its Sunnis.

This need for decisive force reinforces another lesson of the Afghan War. Don't go to war without the support of a strong international coalition and key regional allies. This sets several interrelated conditions for success:

- There must be a clear cause for going to war with Iraq, not merely conspiracy theories or a vague pretext. The US does not absolutely need a smoking gun in terms of major Iraqi aggression but it does need Iraqi actions provocative enough to demonstrate that war is necessary, if not inevitable.
- Create a coalition that includes key allies like Britain. This not only has military value, it greatly undermines charges that the US is acting unilaterally and in some form of "neoimperialism."
- Have the support of key regional allies like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Obtain at least the tacit support of key moderate Arab states like Egypt and Jordan. Avoid the image of being anti-Arab or anti-Islamic and clashes of civilization.

- The US should offer its poorer regional allies tangible aid before the fighting begins; not as an afterthought. It should make it clear that it will work with Turkey and Jordan to support them, just as it did with Pakistan.

Begin the propaganda battle before the attack, not after it. The US was far too slow to conduct the battle for hearts and minds in Afghanistan, and clumsy during much of its execution. The US will be far more likely to be able to take advantage of intangibles if it begins a massive political and information battle to win this war before the fighting actually begins, and will be more likely to obtain and sustain allied support.

Recognize that the “backlash” effect of the Second Intifada will be much worse in fighting an Arab Iraq than a small, non-Arab, and extremist element in Afghanistan. The US will face far more Arab resentment, which will be compounded by Saddam's largely successful political manipulation of the hardships of the Iraq people and support for the Palestinian cause.

- It will be far important to have a visible US effort to push for a ceasefire and peace process, and to do so in a way that does not seem to favor Israel.
- This may be a time for a head on clash with the Israeli government over any expansion of settlements as a counterbalance for continuing support in the war against terrorism.

Don't undersize the US military force deployed to win the war, and act decisively from the start. Don't confuse the limited intensity and tempo of combat in Afghanistan with what is needed in Iraq.

- Over-deploy enough US forces to win rapidly, to keep casualties on all sides low, and to limit collateral damage. Let the critics and analysts whine about inefficiency and excessive force later. Do everything necessary to ensure the ability win.
- Exploit the advances in US air power from the start and do so in ways that are so intense and decisive as to inflict shock and awe as well as major initial damage.

- Act on the understanding that as long as the basic targets are justified and the US is avoiding civilian targets, experience in Kosovo and Afghanistan shows that the US gets roughly the same blame for the civilian casualties and collateral damage caused by its use of air power and military forces almost regardless of how much force it uses. Don't let fear of short-term civilian casualties and collateral damage paralyze effective military action. The next result is to extend the length of the war and raise the total eventual level of civilian casualties and collateral damage.
- Don't, however, count on air power and/or Iraqi opposition forces as a substitute for US and allied ground power or the overall support of regional allies. The target base in Iraq is an order of magnitude bigger and no one can count out Iraq's heavy divisions. Deploy at least several US heavy divisions and prepare for serious land battles.
- Be fully aware that Kosovo, Desert Fox, and Afghanistan have shown that US military planners, targeteers, and US air and missile strike planners have done relatively little to improve their understanding of strategic targeting and the value of attacking given leadership, infrastructure, economic, and logistic targets since the Gulf War. Prolonged bombing on rear area targets does have major cumulative impacts. However, US Air Force strategic targeting doctrine and planning is just as unconvincing and self-deluding as it was in World War II. We are far, far better at blowing things up than we were then. Unfortunately, we only are good at knowing what to blow up, and measuring the impact of the resulting damage, with tactical and military interdiction targets.
- Continue to take the Iraqi threat to US air seriously in spite of Iraqi weaknesses. The air force has some real capabilities, and the land-based air defense forces are dense enough to be a real threat. A largely immune, heavy bomber-based attack force worked well in Afghanistan, but may not be as survivable in Iraq.

Don't count on a repetition of the open armored warfare and exposed Iraqi deployments of the Gulf War. Both the Taliban and Serbians have shown Iraq the advantages of sheltering forces in urban and populated areas, and trying to force the US

to fight in cities. An Iraqi “urban sanctuary” strategy does involve political risks for the regime because of possible disaffections, but it is a far sounder strategy than deploying forces into an open desert where US air power can easily kill them.

Take Iraqi proliferation and the counterforce problem seriously. Al Qaida seems to have been restricted to reading about CBRN weapons. Iraq actually has them. The US must take the threat of some form of Iraqi asymmetric attack on an ally or the US homeland seriously, and if Saddam feels he has no hope, weapons like smallpox are possible. This means a ruthless and immediate use of US air and missile power against key suspect targets from the start. It means convincing US escalatory threats and preparation for the Iraqi covert or asymmetric equivalent of launch on warning/launch under attack.