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## Iraq war has other ill effects / Damage to the U.S. is certain to endure

John Arquilla

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Even while attention is focused on our troubled military campaign in Iraq, we should be thinking about the other enduring problems caused by American fumbling there, including the growth of terrorist networks, the wearing out of our armed forces, and the grave damage done to our reputation.

The most pernicious effect of our occupation of Iraq has been that this "central front" in the global war on terror has become a springboard for terror's war on innocent civilians around the world. Iraq is far more than just a magnet for jihadists drawn to engage our troops there. It has become a symbol of American overreaching and of our inability to defeat terror networks.

And so more networks are forming every day, all over the world, often under a loose rubric of al Qaeda affiliation. This has resulted in a staggering rise in the number of terrorist attacks in recent years.

The State Department recently released statistics showing more than a sevenfold increase in the number of "significant" terrorist attacks worldwide from 2001 through 2006. And in deliberate attacks on civilians, big or small, the numbers also give cause for alarm. There were 14,000 such attacks in 2006, a leap from about 3,000 attacks in 2005.

Clearly, we're moving in the wrong direction. Even though the American "homeland" has not been successfully struck since 9/11, many other countries have been hit -- repeatedly, and often quite hard, across a swath of the world from Madrid to Mindanao.

Ironically, the most dangerous places for the innocents of the world are Afghanistan and Iraq, the two sites where large contingents of U.S. forces are deployed. Just under one-half of last year's total attacks took place in Iraq. This alarming figure suggests that our troops should be used in much different ways than they have been. Operations in Iraq, after four years of floundering, have finally moved in a more productive direction, with the shift toward sprinkling small outposts throughout neighborhoods offering somewhat better protection to Iraqis.

But by now, chances of winning a military victory have largely faded, and the U.S. armed forces are already exhausted -- some leaders even talk of the army being "broken."

This is the second chronic problem caused by our occupation of Iraq. Our forces deployed there have virtually punched themselves out by trying to use "overwhelming force" against will-o'-the-wisp insurgent networks. Instead, they should have been operating all along in smaller advisory units, helping friendly Iraqi forces to do better.

But senior leaders, in and out of the military, pooh-poohed this idea for years, lamenting repeatedly that our troubles were caused by a "lack" of troops. Their mantra has consisted of a chant saying that the war could have been won if only our numbers were greater.

Had President Bush listened to these calls for far larger numbers of troops to deploy to Iraq, however, our situation would be even worse overall. The strain on our whole logistics, training, refitting system -- not to mention the psychic toll on our troops -- would have quickly become intolerable, and the damage done would take even longer to recover from. And the insurgents would simply have slipped our heavy punches, then taken their time to select from the much larger number of targets we would have provided them.

As matters stand, the U.S. military is already worn down more than enough by what we've actually done in Iraq, and will take several years to be fully ready once again to take on another demanding task. We should all offer up thanks that a new war hasn't started while we've been caught on the desert flypaper of Iraq.

Indeed, think for a moment about what might have been -- or what could be, for the next several years -- if, in the middle of the nuclear proliferation crisis with North Korea, Dear Leader Kim Jong Il were to march his million-man army southward. A catastrophe would ensue, making the debacle in Iraq look pale.

Other possible conflicts would also become the most daunting of challenges. Whether war with Iran -- over proliferation issues, as in the case of North Korea -- or with China, in the event we were needed to defend Taiwan, the U.S. military would be exceptionally hard-pressed to respond. The drain of the war in Iraq has come close to crippling us in these other theaters of operations -- for now and for some years to come.

But perhaps what has been most crippled by Iraq is our reputation in the world, the third great price of this misbegotten war. The abuses at Abu Ghraib, Haditha and elsewhere haven't helped. And the continued use of heavy aerial bombs against individuals holed up in homes has led to a steady stream of "collateral damage" -- an awful euphemism for the deaths of innocents.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq have caused others around the world to question our motives and our methods. And for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the noble aims of U.S. foreign policy have come under searing scrutiny. Beyond world opprobrium, divisions at home have also torn the fabric of our own society.

Iraq has become a deadly "gift that keeps giving." The quagmire there is emboldening terror networks to form up -- perhaps some of them in service to rogue states -- even while our military is increasingly worn down. But in the end, it is the loss of respect for and trust in the United States that will hurt us the most.

Even now, it may not be too late to stop the hemorrhaging.

For example, instead of continued bickering over timelines for withdrawal, there should be agreement to stop the surge immediately and begin removing other brigades. Those troops that remain will keep working closely with Iraqis from the network of outposts that is being created. By the end of this year, only a small residual American force would remain, but it would stay indefinitely in an advisory role and conduct some counterterrorist special operations.

A single policy step such as this would mitigate each of the three major long-term problems caused by our involvement in Iraq. The reduction of forces would free up huge resources -- particularly intelligence capabilities -- for the fight against terror networks in other parts of the world. It would also immediately begin to ease the tension on our strained military, allowing it more quickly to recover its capacity for deterring or dealing with any new looming conflicts. And finally, it would signal to the world -- not to mention to the average American -- that our intention there was neither conquest nor occupation.

This is the only option that deals with all the devils that have sprung from the dust of Iraq: drawing down our forces. Sharply, and starting now.

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