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Hard Truths About Iraq

By Ivan Eland

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In Washington, a town in which most people, both government and non-government employees, are involved, one way or another, in public relations spin, the thing that will get you in the most trouble is telling the simple truth. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter recently stepped in it by stating what should have been obvious to the world: he blamed Iraqi forces for the loss to ISIS of Ramadi, an important Iraqi provincial capital, telling CNN that, "The Iraqi forces just showed no will to fight. They vastly outnumbered the opposing force and yet they withdrew from the site."

Although evidence that Carter's conclusion was not rocket science came in the form of video showing Iraqi military vehicles fleeing at high speeds from the town, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi diplomatically rebuffed the provider of U.S. military assistance to his forces by saying, "I am sure he was fed with wrong information." Yeah, right.

In classic Washington form, Vice President Joe Biden had to call Abadi to clean up Carter's truthful indiscretion. The White House issued the following statement: "The vice president recognized the enormous sacrifice and bravery of Iraqi forces over the past eighteen months in Ramadi and elsewhere." Although episodes of "sacrifice and bravery" on the part of the Iraqi troops very well could have occurred, these forces, which the United States spent eight years training, cut and ran in critical situations when ISIS forces, inferior in number, initially took over about one-third Iraq last year and in Ramadi more recently.

If all of this wasn't enough, Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the head of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, which is helping the Shi'ite Iraqi government defend against ISIS, countered that the United States "has no will to fight" against ISIS and was leaving everything up to the Iranians and Iraqis. He then added that the United States "didn't do a damn thing" to stop ISIS's advance on Ramadi.

There is some truth to Suleimani's second allegation. Ramadi was besieged for a long time, but neither the United States nor the Iraqi government did much to send assistance. In the case of the Iraqi government, it was scared to arm Sunni tribes to fight ISIS, because it was afraid those weapons could later be used for Sunni resistance to its oppressive Shi'ite regime. As for Suleimani's first allegation, that has some truth to it too. U.S. public opinion is tired of overseas military quagmires, especially in Iraq. The American people, reacting to Isis's beheading of a few Americans after the United States had commenced bombing the group, seemed to want some U.S. action against it, as long as American military casualties weren't high and the operation didn't turn into another quagmire on the ground. That is why the Obama administration has confined itself to ineffectual, and maybe even counterproductive, air strikes instead of reinserting large numbers of U.S. ground forces back into Iraq.

Yet, Suleimani's snide comments, although largely correct, beg the question of why the United States – being on the other side of the world from the conflict – should be involved at all. However, the Iraqi government should be concerned about ISIS, which is largely a threat to the Middle East region, and so should neighboring Iran. The major reason that ISIS could encourage lone wolf terrorists (of much less threat than organized groups, such as al Qaeda or its regional affiliates) to launch attacks on American soil is to get non-Muslim (read: U.S.) forces out of the Middle East. (Come to think of it, that is al Qaeda's main gripe with the United States too.) In the 1980s, Hezbollah, a Shi'ite group that was created to counter non-Muslim Israel's invasion of Lebanon, also attacked U.S. targets until the United States withdrew its troops from that country, then on a one-sided "peacekeeping" mission to help Israel and its Christian allies there. Once U.S. forces pulled out, Hezbollah attacks on the U.S. targets gradually dissipated. The same likely would happen with any lame lone wolf attacks against U.S. targets by ISIS, which is mainly concerned with setting up an Islamist state in Iraq and Syria.

Islamist terrorism against the United States is primarily caused by the fact that it's a non-Islamic country attacking or invading Muslim lands. One doesn't need to agree with the terrorists' methods to scrutinize their motives for attacking. Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the Bush and Obama administrations – and Americans in general – have not had the courage to examine this question. Instead, subsequent to 9/11, they merely doubled down and attacked or invaded more Islamic countries – seven to be exact – thus helping to proliferate and strengthen Islamist terrorist groups around the region.

Perhaps the fall of Ramadi will be similar to the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in 1968. The Viet Cong, backed by the North Vietnamese, invaded South Vietnam. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces defeated the Viet Cong militarily, but politically the war effort lost much steam at home because the U.S. government had assured Americans that the United States was winning there. The massive enemy offensive belied that claim. Up until Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria

were overrun by ISIS, the U.S. government was once again telling Americans that the enemy was on the run. This time, the enemy didn't just win politically but militarily too.

If a "Tet Offensive-style effect" eventually stopped U.S. bombing of ISIS, and all U.S. forces were withdrawn from non-strategic Iraq and Syria, the United States and its people actually would be safer. However, now no military draft exists to involuntary shanghai young men (and now maybe women) to fight and die in faraway lands for no reason, as there was during the Vietnam War. The only downside to this improvement in policy is that the full cost of war is felt by only the small percentage of the population in the voluntary American military's families. Thus, unfortunately, the United States probably will continue muddling along in Iraq and Syria and may even gradually get sucked into another ground quagmire.