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Warning to the US: beware treating Afghanistan like Iraq

It's a mistake to think that 'failed states' won't put up strong resistance

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President Obama is likely to announce in the coming days that he will withdraw all US combat troops from Iraq by August 2010. Many of these soldiers will end up in Afghanistan where the Taliban is getting stronger and the US-backed government weaker by the day. How much has the US learnt from its debacle in Iraq?

One lesson not learnt in Washington is that it is a bad idea to become involved in a war in any so-called "failed state". This patronising term suggests that if a state has failed, foreign intervention is justified and will face limited resistance. But the greatest US foreign policy disasters over the last generation have all been in places where organised government had largely collapsed.

There was Lebanon in 1983, when 242 US marines were blown up in Beirut, Somalia 10 years later, and Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The lesson, which applies to nowhere more than Afghanistan, is that societies with weak state structures devise lethally effective ways of defending themselves.

I remember an Iraqi neurosurgeon, who had just successfully defended his hospital in Baghdad against looters with a Kalashnikov in 2003, saying to me: "The Americans should remember that even Saddam Hussein had difficulty ruling this country." Iraq was never like an east European

autocracy. Even under Saddam every Iraqi owned a gun. Iraqis would not fight for Saddam's regime, but they would fight for their own ethnic or sectarian community or their country. An error made by the US was to imagine that just because Shia and Sunni Arabs hated each other that Iraqi nationalism was not a potent force.

This conviction that a victory has already been won is leading American commentators to assume blandly that the US can leave behind 50,000 non-combat troops in Iraq without any Iraqi objection. This would also be contrary to the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated with enormous difficulty and after prolonged wrangling last year.

The greatest source of error for the Americans in Iraq was not a policy mistake but an abiding belief that they alone made the political weather. Anything good or bad which happened was the result of American action. Thus if the Sunni insurgency against American forces started to come to an end in the second half of 2007 it must be because of the "surge", as the 30,000 extra US troops and more aggressive tactics on the ground were known. The real reason for the fall in violence had more to do with the Shia victory over the Sunni in an extraordinarily savage civil war, a reaction against Al-Qa'ida, and the ceasefire called by the Mehdi Army to which belonged most of the Shia death squads.

If the US intervention in Iraq proved anything it was that the Americans never had the strength to shape the political and military environment to their own liking. Yet well-reviewed books on Iraq still appear in which Iraqis have a walk-on role and when somebody pushes a button in Washington something happens in Baghdad. These misconceptions are important because the mythology about the supposed success of the "surge" is being promoted as a recipe for victory in Afghanistan.

This would not be the first time that false analogies between Iraq and Afghanistan have misled Washington. I was in Afghanistan during the war against the Taliban at the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002 and one of the most striking features of the conflict was the lack of fighting. The warlords and their men, who had previously rallied to the Taliban, simply went home because they did not want to be bombed by US aircrafts and they were heavily bribed to do so. There was very little combat. Yet when I went to Washington to work in a think-tank for a few months later that year the Afghan war was being cited by the Bush administration as proof of America's military omnipotence.

It is difficult to believe that the Obama administration is going to make as many crass errors as its predecessor. So amazed were the Iranians to see President Bush destroy their two most detested enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 that some theologians held that such stupidity must be divinely inspired and heralded the return of the Twelfth Imam and the Shia millennium.

The reinforced US military presence in Afghanistan risks provoking a backlash in which religion combines with nationalism to oppose foreign intervention. It is this that has been the real strength of movements like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Mehdi Army in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan which the US wants to eradicate.