

August 7, 2003

Word Games About the Iraqi Resistance

Is the United States "a Terrorist Magnet"?

By M. SHAHID ALAM

Is it possible that a single metaphor, one that has dropped from the lips of a serving American general, can offer some forbidden insights into the dynamics of America's relations with the Islamic world?

On July 28, 2003, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, commander of US ground forces in Iraq, while talking to CNN, blamed the "multi-faceted conflict" Americans face in Iraq on "terrorists," "former regime leadership," "criminals" and "hired assassins." Then he volunteered an explanation that I think, perhaps unintentionally, was daring in its clarity. "[There] is what I would call a terrorist magnet where America, being present here in Iraq, creates a target of opportunity if you will."

Is it really necessary to pick bones with the General's description of the Iraqi resistance as "terrorist activity"? The Iraqis have not attacked any American civilians, inside Iraq or elsewhere; they have only targeted American troops. Nor are they not attacking just any American troops. They are attacking only those who have invaded and occupied their country. Why then does the General call the Iraqi guerrillas terrorists, criminals and hired assassins? Perhaps, this is another semantic ploy we have borrowed from the Israelis. The Palestinians are terrorists even when they attack Israeli tanks and armor, even when their only weapons are stones.

It is all the more stunning, after this dissimulation, when General Sanchez offers his theory of "a terrorist magnet." It claims that the presence of American troops inside Iraq has become a "magnet" for "terrorist activity." It is the presence of American troops *in* Iraq that is the source, the cause of this "terrorist activity." Moreover, this is natural. What else would you expect if you placed a "magnet" among iron filings? The iron filings would all be drawn towards and stick to the magnet.

This theory of "a terrorist magnet" is disconcertingly heretical. Although no one seems to have noticed, it undermines two key arguments the Bush administration has used, both *ex ante* and *ex post*, to sell the war on terrorism. First, the war on terrorism has been based on the premise that the terrorist attacks by Arab extremists are an ontological phenomenon. It is in the *nature* of the attackers, a *nature* instilled by their societies and in particular by their religion, to attack America. They fear

America's virtues: its freedom, prosperity, and the rights it grants to women. The terrorist attacks are motivated by the ontological rage of an inferior and flawed civilization--Islam--against the superior, dynamic, Christian civilization of the West. It is a thesis that has been advanced assiduously by Jewish and Christian Zionists. And it is this thesis that President Bush embraced when he declared war against the attackers of 9-11.

The theory General Sanchez offers contradicts this. It substitutes a Newtonian explanation for the ontological postulate favored by the Bush administration and much of the American media. The Iraqi resistance is not rooted in Iraqi nature, or in Sunni Iraqi nature, or Baa'thi Sunni Iraqi nature. The Iraqis have not sneaked into the United States to attack American troops. As the Iraqis see it, the American troops are being attacked because they are in the wrong place (Iraq), doing the wrong thing (illegally occupying Iraq), for the wrong reasons (capturing Iraqi oil and deepening Israeli hegemony over the Arabs).

The theory of a terrorist magnet would seem to run afoul of a second rationale for the US war against Iraq. In the first weeks after the official end of the war, when it appeared that no WMDs were to be found--and there was a risk that the earlier claims about WMDs would be seen as weapons of mass deception--we invented a new buzz word: Liberation. The WMDs were not the only reason for invading Iraq. We went in to liberate the Iraqis from Saddam's tyranny. Conveniently forgotten was our support for this tyranny before the First Gulf War, our betrayal of the Kurdish resistance and Iraqi uprising, and the deaths and suffering we had inflicted on the Iraqis over thirteen years of bombings and sanctions.

Why then have the liberators become "a terrorist magnet"? Admittedly, the armed resistance is not national yet; it is confined mostly to Iraq's Sunni Arab population. But if the Iraqis leading the armed resistance are "former regime leadership," "criminals" and "hired assassins," they could not hide among an Iraqi population well-disposed to their American liberators. However, to this date, no Iraqi has yet betrayed members of the Iraqi resistance.

If the toll of American dead and wounded continues to mount, this will raise more troubling questions. Why had we not seen this going in? Why had we not foreseen that 150,000 Americans deposited amidst a hostile population--a population that we had bombed and besieged for thirteen years--would become a magnet for "terrorists"? It is true that Muslims have a poor record of resisting local tyrannies, even when they are proxies for foreign powers; but we should have known that they have unexceptionably resisted foreign occupations. We should have known that Mujahideen ("terrorists" for their enemies) from all corners of the world would soon be entering Iraq to fight the foreign occupation, as they had done in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Palestine.

So, if ordinary young Americans are dying today in Iraq--and many more recover from war wounds--that is not because the administration, the neoconservative ideologues, and the media could not have foreseen this. They did, but chose to ignore these concerns. In

their calculus, the lives of a few ordinary Americans were expendable, compared to the great prizes before them. Arab oil had to be secured; and the Arab world had to be made safe for Israeli hegemony.

The thesis of a terrorist magnet raises a broader question, one that is at the heart of America's relations with the Islamic world. General Sanchez's remark--about Americana troops in Iraq serving as "terrorist magnets"--has drawn few comments from the media. The Newtonian connection he drew between an American action (insertion of troops into Iraq) and the reaction (Iraqi resistance) was perhaps too obvious to deny. And who would dare impugn the patriotism of the General commanding our forces in Iraq? Perhaps, that is why his remarks were quickly laid to rest.

However, no one in America's mainstream media, much less a general or a politician, will dare to make a similar connection between America's foreign policies towards the Islamic world and the anti-American forces that now proliferate in that region. The American political establishment promotes the ideology that the United States can do no wrong in its dealings with foreign countries. The United States is not only the most powerful country that has ever existed; it is also the most benevolent.

As a result, it is heretical to suggest that 9-11 may have been a blowback from our policies towards the Middle East. To suggest such a connection is not to justify 9-11. Yet most Americans are unwilling to separate the morality and causality of 9-11. Until we learn to do so there can be no rational discourse on the etiology of the growing conflicts between the United States and the Islamic world. And if that does not happen soon, the civilizational war which the Zionists--Christian and Jewish--and some Islamic extremists so avidly project may become a frightening reality.

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