

## It's Time For America To Apply Its Afghan Lessons To Iraq

In the history of recent international relations, there have been few contrasts so stark as that between the way America and Britain "did" Afghanistan, and the way they are trying to "do" Iraq.

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By Ahmed Rashid

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, the same Bush Administration that has gone so reluctantly to the UN over Iraq built the most formidable coalition the world has ever seen, through the UN, to defeat the Taliban. There was a conviction around the world that the Administration had moved towards multilateralism, and the world eagerly responded to its appeal for help.

Army units from more than 20 countries participated in the American-led campaign that removed the Taliban from power. The full authority of the UN Security Council was behind the war effort and, despite the deaths of between 3,000 and 8,000 civilians in bombing, the Afghans welcomed their liberation.

Another 30 countries have participated in the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), which has kept the peace in Kabul since the war ended. Many European countries, but especially Britain, Germany and France, contributed to both the fighting force and the peace-making force.

The end of the Afghan war signalled yet further international co-operation, in the formation of the new government in Kabul. At the Bonn conference in December 2001, America encouraged the UN to take the lead, roped in such implacable enemies as Iran to make sure nobody was left outside the tent to complain afterwards and allowed every Afghan faction to participate except for the Taliban.

The result was a government headed by Hamid Karzai that was endorsed by all Afghan factions, the international community and, most importantly, Afghanistan's neighbours, who signalled that they would stop interfering in that country's affairs.

At a conference on Afghan reconstruction, more than 100 countries pledged \$4.5 billion for the next two years. It was a moment of unparalleled hope and international hand-holding - and it was made possible by American and British determination that any government in Kabul be not just Made In America, but should have the world's, and Afghanistan's, stamp.

Compare that with Iraq. Iraqi exile and opposition groups, including the Kurds, have been largely bypassed in the present American-led war effort, even though they were promised a role, and were trained for it. There appear to be no Afghan Northern Alliance-type troops on the ground in Iraq helping the allies.

A bunch of Iraqi exiles run by the CIA are waiting in the wings to take over in Baghdad - and will presumably work alongside an American general who will be the de facto ruler of the country. This is already seen as unacceptable by much of Europe and the entire Islamic world, and it has emerged as the main bone of contention between the Americans and British even as they fight their way to Baghdad.

America has failed to put forward a clear game plan for how it sees Iraq in the aftermath of war - indeed, the Administration is itself deeply divided on this. So it is not surprising that many Iraqis prefer to continue fighting rather than surrender to an uncertain and unknown future.

None of Iraq's Arab neighbours has been consulted about the future of Iraq - which is why they are all preparing their own favourite Iraqi proxies. The Turks and Iranians are already ignoring American appeals to stay out.

Jordan, Syria and even Saudi Arabia could be next. Meanwhile the Administration gives no guarantees that Israel will stay out of the conflict - a critical issue for the Arab world if the ousting of Saddam Hussein is not to turn into a wider Israeli-Arab conflict, something that Islamic extremists would love to see happen.

There is no attempt being made to build a new international coalition through the UN, which could endorse a

new government in Baghdad. If it is to be effective, such a coalition must include all Iraq's neighbours, including the Arabs and Israel.

There is even less clarity on who will carry out the reconstruction of Iraq, and how, although some American companies already seem to have received contracts for start-up work, such as repairing the oil fields.

This kind of favouritism and lack of transparency could emerge as one of the biggest scandals of the war, and lack of international co-operation may well impair the humanitarian relief that Iraqis now desperately need.

The American and British armed forces have only a limited and short-term capability to provide relief aid. American and French wrangling, and lack of agreement at the UN over who takes charge of the oil-for-food programme, could mean that the UN - which has the only widespread infrastructure inside the country for aid distribution - is paralysed.

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) pumped more wheat into Afghanistan in the midst of the war than it ever did during the peaceful Taliban era. The WFP's main provider of cash was Washington.

During the Afghan conflict, in contrast, the British Government was instrumental in ensuring that America went down the path of multilateralism. Britain's expertise on Afghanistan was accepted by the Americans; MI6 had kept its hand in the Taliban till, where the CIA had walked away years earlier.

Such was Britain's edge in Washington and around the world that the Foreign Secretary was able to deliver Syrian and Iranian support to the State Department. No doubt Tony Blair has tried to do the same on Iraq, but he signed on to the regime change agenda too early, too comprehensively and too unquestioningly.

There is little doubt that the allies will triumph in Iraq, but the costs of a delayed success will be enormous. It will almost certainly undo many of the bonds that have held the world together since the end of the Cold War.

Most significantly, it may reduce world commitment to co-operation in the war against terrorism. After Iraq, America's concerns and its wars will no longer be seen as the world's concerns and wars, but as a sole and cheap bid for empire and influence.

We have come a long way from the heady days of the war in Afghanistan.

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