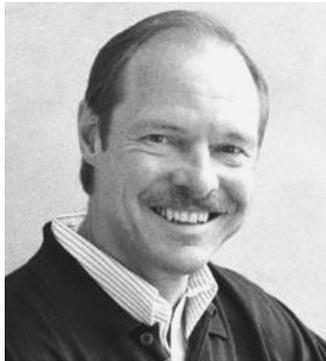


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Perspectives



Iraq:

A Defining Moment for America and Islamicism

Whether you live in Manila, Cologne, Moscow or Seattle, one thing is certain: the threat is militant Islam. Not long after 9/11, I predicted in Perspectives and commentaries I wrote for other publications that the world was readying for the War on Islam. Some readers were offended and accused me of bigotry; they did not read what I had to say. My forecast was not for the world to declare battle against Islam, the religion; what I envisaged was that at some point in time all the world's power centers would simultaneously realize that the greatest threat to their internal security was coming from the same source: Islamicism.

We've now arrived there. Moscow's first enemy is the Muslim extremism emanating from Chechnya, while China looks with growing unease on the developments in the Philippines and Indonesia. Americans have for a while been trapped in a mindset where daily life hinges on Homeland Security operated lights that intermittently flash yellow, orange and red. The Europeans, always ready to join a trend when it's a few years old, are also stirring. The tragic bombings in Madrid have convinced legislators across Euroland that Homeland Security is a system worth copying. Our planet has not been this polarized for some time—from here on, it's the world against Islamicism.

Even Moderate Muslims Are Frustrated

Only one thing is still lacking to bring the tragedy to conclusion. For now, we still manage to discriminate between Islam's lunatic fringe and law-abiding Muslims. The tragedy is that such distinctions are likely to become blurred, because fighting the Islamicist fanatics translates into alienating those who have no sympathy for the violent ways of the extremists, but happen to live in the same neighborhood. How do you effectively target terrorism without also creating havoc in the lives of those who don't sympathize with it? As American field commanders in Iraq are learning, it's not possible. Increasingly many moderate Muslims are as frustrated with the West as they are with Saddam's loyalists. Last year's liberators are today's occupation force.

In the meantime, the troublemakers are guaranteeing that anything resembling democracy will remain a distant dream. The signing of the interim constitution for Iraq was the signal for Al Qaida and a dozen affiliated groups to evoke a civil war. The reason is simple enough: America has articulated its goal to democratize the Middle East region, with Iraq as its prototype. If that's allowed to happen, terrorism will die an agonizing death. Worse for Al Qaida's ilk is that if one single democracy is allowed to emerge, the region's disenfranchised, angry masses which are terrorism's constituents will actually see that a pluralistic society based on law and order spawns opportunity.

Now Is the Defining Moment

In short, we've arrived at a defining moment. Defining for the Islamicist lobby, because if a democracy rises in Iraq, militant Islam will decisively wane. Defining for America, because it likes to view itself as the world's moral leader and is now coerced into paying a huge price for the liberation of Iraq. If Washington backs off, terrorism will have won and tens of millions of moderate Muslims will be convinced that Washington's word is without value. America's prestige and credibility everywhere will be in tatters.

That's why the more likely outcome is that more troops will be deployed to Iraq. And that, of course, will only add to the polarization between Islam and the rest of the world. As Winston Churchill would say, we're only at the end of the beginning. The challenge to Western ways by Islam's dispossessed will probably dominate the first half of this century. □

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