US Army War College

USAWC Press

9-11-2015

Strategic Insights: The Will To Fight

M. Chris Mason

Strategic Insights: The Will To Fight

September 11, 2015 | Dr. M. Chris Mason

Events on world battlefields over the past two years should give the U.S. Army pause to reconsider the entire Foreign Internal Defense (FID) mission. The seemingly unarguable axiom that "good training makes good soldiers" has been proven to be not always true. Good training does not always make good soldiers. If the definition of a good soldier is "a member of the armed forces who stands and fights for his or her country," then a good deal of money has been spent in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere without measurable and sustainable success. More than a third of all Afghan defense forces trained with U.S. taxpayer money desert in Afghanistan each year, and in Iraq they simply disappear.

On May 24, 2015, referring to the Iraqi Army created by the United States since the execution of Saddam Hussain, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said, "We can give them training, we can give them equipment—we obviously can't give them the will to fight."[1] There, in a strategic nutshell, was why the United States lost its wars in Vietnam and Iraq at the strategic level, and why it is going to lose in Afghanistan: We can invade countries, we can create governments, and we can pronounce them "legitimate," but we can't make men from those countries fight and die for those governments. Our Army fought well in all three conflicts; their armies did not.

The FID mission proceeds from the assumption that good training always makes good soldiers. In the U.S. Army, good training does make good soldiers, because America is a unified nation and American Soldiers are willing to fight, and if need be, die for a country they believe in, no matter who is the commander in chief. American Soldiers are patriots: They fight for a country and a government they believe is worth fighting for. *E pluribus Unum*; Out of many, One. Many people from many countries come here to the "great melting pot" and become Americans, and this understanding of American Soldiers' willingness to fight is often projected into societies overseas, where it is also assumed to be true. However, it is not a universal truth. In fact, America is perhaps the only country

on earth where people of such diverse ethnicities, languages, and religions have forged a sense of nationhood. In most countries, including Europe, much of Asia and South America, citizens do believe themselves to be citizens of a nation—for example, they identify themselves as Germans, or Peruvians, or Koreans, among scores of other examples. But in these cases, the great majority of the citizens of those countries are from a single ethnic and linguistic group. World military history through the ages shows that men from nations—defined as "a country in which the great majority of the citizens locate their personal identities at the national level"—will fight for their countries. It is this personal sense of national identity which is crucial to the collective will to fight for one's country and one's government.

Simply put, history shows that where this kind of national identity exists, soldiers will stand and fight for their country. Where it does not, however, they will not. Why is this so? Because, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in 1954, "Strong and stable governments and societies are necessary to support the creation of strong armies."[2] Few would argue with the truth of this maxim, or suggest the reverse is true. The strength of the army flows from the strength of the nation. The Joint Chiefs delivered this wisdom to the State Department more than 60 years ago. Yet, despite the absence of such stable governments and societies, the U.S. attempted to create strong armies *anyway* in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

It is often argued that creating such military forces is intended to provide the "security bubble" which will allow new governments enough time to stabilize—to provide "political breathing space." But this concept is not supported by either empirical evidence or experience. Believing in something which is not supported by either evidence or experience is the scientific definition of magical thinking. As American authorities with deep experience in these countries pointed out beforehand, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan had weak and inchoate societies characterized by deep religious, ethnic, and linguistic divisions and virtually insurmountable political obstacles. By any reasonable analysis, there was no chance of them becoming nations—i.e., countries in which the great majority of the population identifies itself at the national level—virtually overnight in historical time. This is simply not how nations form. Indeed, "nation building" is an oxymoron; nations are not built, they are formed over centuries, like stalactites. Nation formation is a glacial, evolutionary, internally-driven process which takes many centuries, if not millennia, to occur. Centuries-old social divisions take centuries to heal, if they ever do. Factions which hated and killed each other in Iraq and Afghanistan 1,000 years ago, for example, still hate and kill each other today. Godfrey Mwakikagile notes, "Tribalism is incompatible with nationalism, and nation-building is impossible without nationhood. And you can't have nationhood without a genuine feeling of common citizenship and identity."[3] Yet, men and women in positions of national authority believed that invading Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan and imposing puppet governments of an alien and

indigenously illegitimate nature was somehow going to work. In fact, the historical record showed that there was never any possibility of strong and stable governments and societies forming rapidly in these countries.

Furthermore, if this "political space" argument was part of a coherent national strategy, why was the development of reliable, trustworthy, and professional South Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan armies such a low military priority? Creating an Afghan National Army (ANA) was clearly a very low priority for the first seven or eight years of the war. The first officer assigned to oversee the creation of the ANA in 2002, a Major, was an Air Force weatherman. The personnel fill rate for embedded trainers (ETTs) for the ANA was below 50 percent for the first 10 years of the program, and the majority of those ETTs were from non-combat occupations who had to be sent to Fort Riley for what the Army termed "remedial combat training" themselves before deployment to train the ANA in basic infantry skills. None of the dozens of ETTs I met and worked with in southern Afghanistan had any prior experience training foreign armies, and no effort was made to accommodate traditional Afghan Army models. In fact, creating sustainable military forces was a very low priority for the U.S. Army in all three countries—Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. If the "creating political space" argument was more than a bromide, developing rock steady, indigenously affordable security forces aligned with traditional, sustainable local military models would have been the highest U.S. military priority, commensurate with its strategic importance. The marginal, belated, and often inept efforts to create these three armies instead as clearly unsustainable miniature versions of the U.S. Army, with poorly vetted, substandard, and hastily assembled recruits, doesn't square with the "political space" rational or even the basic aspects of a well-considered plan.

In summary, a strong and stable government and a strong and stable society are the essential precursors, the *sine qua non*, for a strong army. If they don't exist, there cannot be a strong army: if there is no nation to fight for, no national army will fight for it. If the collapse of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in two weeks in 1975 left any doubt, the dismal performance of the Iraqi army over the last year and the steady disintegration of the Afghan National Army (ANA) are further proof. The Afghan Ministry of Defense reports that 6,000 (ANA) soldiers are leaving the force every month now, a rate which will approach 50 percent of the entire ANA this year. The recruiting backfill is less than 4,500 men per month. So at the current loss rate, which has been algebraically steady for the past two years, the ANA is shrinking by 18,000 men per year. The number of ANA soldiers actually physically present for duty today in one of the six combat Corps, and not assigned to the commandos, special forces, or the Kabul defense division (the 111th), is approximately 45,750 men. Because South Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan aren't (or weren't) nations, and don't (or didn't) have strong and stable governments and

societies, at the strategic level of war, raising voluntary, non-coercive armies with enough soldiers who would stand, fight, and die for those governments and societies was a nonstarter .

While the entire FID mission requires an extensive strategic reassessment based on social and cultural realities and the literal impossibility of nation-building, the ongoing FID missions at the operational and tactical levels in Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Africa, and elsewhere need immediate course corrections. A lot of money and effort is being expended right now that has no realistic chance of producing successful outcomes along current design parameters. In blunt terms, the ongoing efforts to create an Iraqi Army and to support an Afghan National Army in their current form are doomed by sectarian schisms and government illegitimacy. Except in a legalistic sense, Iraq no longer exists, at least in the 1922 Treaty of Mohammara meaning of the word. The boundaries created by British imperial officials with straight edges across the old Ottoman Empire in 1918 made no sense then and, as a result of the events of the last ten years, make even less sense today. Only Saddam Hussein's rule of terror and torture held the lid on this Pandora's Box, and only the mortal fear of a fate worse than death kept an Iraqi army together. (The current crisis was posited by Conrad Crane and Andrew Terrill of the Strategic Studies Institute in 2003.[4]) In a practical sense, Iraq does not exist as a nation today, and it is highly unlikely to become one in the future. So there is nothing for which an "Iraqi national army" will have the will to fight in the foreseeable future. The same is true, at the strategic level, of Afghanistan. Less than 15 percent of eligible voters in the last presidential election voted for Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, and the social, ethnic, religious, and linguistic fault lines in that country remain as deep and bitter as ever, perhaps more so.

This is the epiphany contained in Secretary Carter's observation. It is borne out by the fact that only 7,000 recruits from a population of some 35,000,000 people have signed up for the newest new version of the Iraqi Army so far, barely 29 percent of the already meagre recruiting goal of 24,000. Having already spent $25 billion U.S. taxpayer dollars in an attempt to train an effective Iraqi Army, the United States is still pursuing the same mirage: an army that will never fight for a nation that doesn't exist. Whatever emerges from the chaos and carnage occurring inside the borders of Iraq, it will not be the 1922 Iraq of British imperial thinking. The people living inside the borders of Syria and the British imperial Iraq recognize this even if many outside those borders still think in terms of putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

So what is to be done? Until a major strategic reassessment can take place, shift the focus pragmatically to what works and cease and desist from what does not. Doing the same thing over and over again to create an Iraqi army will not yield a different result. No foreign power can make the many bitter enemies inside Iraq come together and call themselves "Iraqis" again, if, indeed, they ever did. The same is true of Afghanistan.

However, those indigenous elements which do identify themselves as a nation—in Iraq in particular the Kurds—are fighting exceptionally well with very limited means to roll back the terrorist organization Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from lands which historically have been theirs. The Kurds believe themselves to be a nation—"a territory in which the great majority of the people identify themselves at the national level." They have shown they are willing to fight, and if need be, to die for that nation. The same is true of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. Where this essential precursor exists, good training does make good soldiers, and the FID mission does makes sense.

There are regional political realities to be observed—and decisions to be made—which will test the Army's fundamental institutional values of loyalty, honor, and integrity. Although they are politically astute enough not to have said so publicly, the Iraqi Kurds—having sacrificed much to protect their people and their land from the terrorists of ISIL—will not go back to being a part of the old Iraq. In fear of this, Turkey—which is home to about half the world's Kurds and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member—has been covertly cooperating with ISIL, providing them with weapons, money, and safe passage through Turkish territory to attack Kurdish settlements like the one on the town of Kobani on June 25, 2015. Turkey is now paying lip service to fighting ISIL and cooperating with NATO as a pretext for bombing those Kurdish groups it does not like outside its own borders—most notably those of the Kurdistan Workers' Party.[5] The United States trains the Kurds, the Turks bomb them. Strange bedfellows indeed.

ISIL is breaking out into a regional terrorist threat even as this article is being written. Apparently coordinated terrorist attacks in France, Tunisia, and Kuwait have recently taken dozens of lives. ISIL is the common enemy of all the more moderate elements (in many cases admittedly a low bar) in the region—including Assad's rump state in the former Syria, Iran, Kuwait, the Kurds, the Shia population of the former Iraq, the Syrian National Coalition, Saudi Arabia, some Sunni tribes inside the former Iraq, and the minority groups of the region like the Mandaeans, Shabaks, and Yazidis. Maintaining the steadfast policy position that the pre-war borders of Iraq and Syria will eventually be reestablished is hindering coordination of effective anti-ISIL military efforts in both countries. Russia, too, has important strategic interests in Syria which it is now vigorously asserting, and the current contretemps over Russian neo-imperialism in Ukraine is hindering strategic cooperation in the Middle East. U.S. and UN bureaucratic instincts also inhibit objective strategic thinking. Just as they did against the creation of Bangladesh, East Timor, South Sudan, Eritrea, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia, the bureaucrats at the State Department and the United Nations will object to redrawing the colonial maps of Iraq and Syria, because the status quo is so entrenched that redrawing maps represents a kind of institutional failure for diplomacy.

Critically, however, none of the regional neighbors will commit conventional land forces to defeat ISIL: not Turkey, not Saudi Arabia, not Iran, certainly not Israel. (Yemen

has disintegrated because it, too, is not a nation, but there the neighbors are intervening against the Houthis.) Instead, the regional powers will fight, as the U.S. is doing, largely by proxy. Only the national groups inside the former borders of Syria and Iraq can defeat ISIL—and they will not be united by FID training to do it for an illusory united Syria or a united Iraq. The U.S. Army should not try to raise and train armies for countries that no longer really exist and nations that never were, and a viable and coherent diplomatic strategy which accepts new political realities should not be far behind. What historian Arnold Isaacs summarized as the reasons for failure in Vietnam are just as true today of the crisis in Iraq and Afghanistan:

> Misperceiving both its enemy and its ally, and imprisoned in the myopic conviction that sheer military force could somehow overcome adverse political circumstances, Washington stumbled from one failure to the next in the continuing delusion that success was just ahead. This ignorance and false hope were mated, in successive administrations, with bureaucratic circumstances that inhibited admission of error and made it always seem safer to keep repeating the same mistakes, rather than risk the unknown perils of a different policy.[6]

ENDNOTES

1. "Carter: Iraqis showed 'no will to fight' in Ramadi," CNN, May 24, 2015, available from *www.cnn.com/2015/05/24/politics/ashton-carter-isis-ramadi/*.

2. Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960*, Stockton, CA: University Press of the Pacific, 2005, p. 379.

3. Godfrey Mwakikagile, *Statecraft and Nation Building in Africa: A Post-colonial Study*, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, *New Africa Press*, 2014, p. 14.

4. See *www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=182*.

5. "Turkish Intel provided weapons to ISIS, terror suspect says, "*The Jerusalem Post*, February 10, 2015, available from *www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Turkish-Intel-provided-weapons-to-ISIS-terror-suspects-says-390571*. The Turkish daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet* published photographs and video of the weapons transfers by Turkish intelligence on its website. "Turkey Government Sending Arms to Syrian Terrorists," *Alalam*, May 30, 2015, available from *en.alalam.ir/news/1707379*. For Turkey bombing Kurds in Iraq, see "Turkish Jets Strike Kurds in Iraq, Complicating Anti-ISIS Fight," NBC News, July 25, 2015, available from *www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/turkish-jets-strike-kurds-iraq-complicating-anti-isis-fight-n398276*. "U.S. Concerns Grow About Turkish Bombardment of Kurdish Separatists," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 12, 2015, available from *www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-concerns-grow-over-turkish-bombardment-of-kurdish-separatists-1439422676*.

6. Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1998.

*****

The views expressed in this Strategic Insights piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This article is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

*****