

Noble, Criminal Western Democracies

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One of the paradoxes of leading Western democracies is how they can be at once so noble and so criminal. A particularly impressive aspect of countries like the United States and the United Kingdom is their political openness, particularly their insistence in many cases on publicly analyzing and evaluating their government's policies, to learn if mistakes were made, and presumably to learn from those mistakes. A case in point is the ongoing inquiry in the UK into the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

At one such public hearing last week the former head of British domestic intelligence service M15, Eliza Manningham-Buller, made three important points about the Iraq war that should be relevant today for Western policymakers in Afghanistan and Iran. The first was the total absence of any credible information linking the Iraqi Baathist regime to the terror attacks of 9/11. The second was that the Anglo-American-led invasion of Iraq radicalized some young British citizens who saw the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as "attack in Islam." The third was that the intelligence on Iraq had been incomplete.

Terror threats in the UK increased dramatically after the Iraq invasion, and by 2004 "we were pretty well swamped (with domestic terrorism plots and threats)," she said. The decision to invade also boosted Al-Qaeda's ability to move into Iraq in a way the group could not previously.

Have the US, the UK and their NATO allies learned from the Iraq war experience? Not in all areas, it seems. The situations today in Iran and Afghanistan suggest that policies are still being implemented with the same weaknesses that officials like Manningham-Buller so honestly admit.

Much of the case against Iran's alleged desire to obtain nuclear weapons is based on fragmentary and inconclusive bits of information and a great deal of speculation and ideological distemper, coupled with the hysteria common in Washington when pro-Israel lobby groups use their influence with American member of Congress who are at once mostly ignorant of Middle Eastern realities and deeply vulnerable to electoral blackmail. The evidence to accuse, pressure, sanction, distrust and threaten Iran is thin as silk thread. In some light conditions, it is alluring and worth examining further; in others, it disappears completely.

Moving toward likely military conflict in Iran on the same factually, legally and ethically shaky basis as the dishonest drive to invade Iraq seems like a poor performance for Western democracies that like to trumpet themselves as custodians and purveyors of the democratic rule of law. When they behave as they did in Iraq, and continue to do now with Iran, they are little more than criminals, rogues and delinquents hiding behind the magnificent glow of the

Magna Carta, habeas corpus, and other fine legacies they can rightly boast of.

In Afghanistan, we are also witnessing today the same sort of ruffian behavior that creates problems as serious as those it purports to resolve. While the initial anti-Al-Qaeda rationale for the war in Afghanistan was more convincing and legitimate than the Iraq adventure, both its conduct and duration suggest that something fundamentally wrong is at hand, because new enemies are created as fast as existing foes are vanquished.

Last Friday, according to Afghan officials, a NATO air strike killed 52 civilians who were sheltering in a house near an active battle between NATO forces and Taliban fighters in the south of the country. This was not an isolated incident, but rather part of a pattern inherent in the use of high-tech firepower by a foreign invader whose technical prowess is rarely matched by cultural sensitivity or local political support.

The newly leaked American armed forces documents on the Afghan war indicate clearly that attacks against civilians generate antipathy and anger among a civilian population and political elites that should be vital allies. The mounting numbers of civilians killed, The New York Times reported, "left the Americans seeking cooperation and support from an Afghan population that grew steadily more exhausted, resentful, fearful and alienated."

By all accounts, the Taliban are growing stronger and the war effort in Afghanistan is not going well for the US-led NATO forces, who can kill at will but have much more difficulty winning the political support of populations whose mothers, wives, sisters, and children they kill indiscriminately. Sure, the killing is often a "mistake" or "collateral damage." Yet you would think that the world's oldest and strongest democracies would learn after considerable experience in invading foreign lands. They should know that such "mistakes" are in fact the routine consequence of assaults defined by thin justification, considerable ignorance, little caring for what actually happens to the local population during or after the fighting, and the combination of poor intelligence and zombie-like ideological frenzy that continues to be well documented in the case of the Iraq invasion.

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