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The Lessons of Chechnya In Iraq: A Realist Approach to Civilian Warfare

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In December of 1994, Russia began its first military campaign against the Chechen separatists with a ground assault on the city of Grozny. A botched pincer maneuver failed to capture the rebels, who killed more than 2,000 Russian soldiers before escaping to the hills. In the next few days, the frustrated Russian military responded by unleashing a torrential bombing campaign that, at its peak, struck the city with 4,000 shells per hour.

When the bombing ended, half of Grozny - once an urban center of 300,000 people - was reduced to ruins, and thousands of civilians were killed. But that was only the beginning. For the international community, the conflict quickly became an epitome of human rights violations. Political leaders and human rights groups around the world roundly condemned the Russian army's behavior and pressured the country's leadership to change its military tactics.

A decade later, it has become clear that this approach has failed miserably. The Russian military, never a champion of progressive warfare, has continued to act as if there was no difference between militants and civilians, engaging in systematic torture, kidnapping,

rape and looting. It has pursued a policy of civilian terror through the infamous *zachistki*, or "security sweeps," that leave dead and missing civilians in their wake. And with Russia now an important ally in the war in terror, it's obvious that any diplomatic pressure from the United States to curb human rights abuse will continue to be cautious and meek.

Clearly, if indiscriminate warfare against civilians is to be stopped, a new approach is needed. The Russian generals, fixed in the inertia of Cold War thinking, are unlikely to concern themselves with such fuzzy, decadent Western notions as human rights. They are far more likely to be persuaded to curb civilian atrocities if they realize that dictates of hard-headed military strategy would argue against such tactics. For by refusing to distinguish between fighters and civilians, the Russian army fused together the interests of previously disparate groups - the Islamic militants, who want to wage a holy war against the Russians, and the general Chechen population, who want to be left alone. In the process, the army created a far more dangerous foe.

In the system of arbitrary terror imposed by the Russian troops, the civilians suddenly found themselves aligned with the rebels. Anatol Lieven has written that, because of the Russian human rights abuses, "Chechen militants have expanded their ability to recruit volunteers even from among those who, prior to the Russian intervention, hated the militants and did not share in their goals." The Russian military's conflation of the militant and the civilian radicalized the latter and popularized the former.

It is not surprising then that one consequence of Russian conduct in Chechnya has been the religious radicalization of the population. Until recently, radical Islam was not common among the Chechens, who practiced a mild form of Sufism rooted in cultural and familial traditions. The growing popularity of militant Islam was a consequence of the war, not its cause. As Djokhar Dudayev, the first Chechen president, said in 1995: "It was Russia that forced us onto the path of Islam."

Throughout the first and the second military campaigns, as Russian

forces continued to antagonize the general population, the Chechen fighters moved from the militant fringe to become symbols of national liberation. Unfortunately for Russia, by acquiring this populist image, the Chechen *mujahadeen* have secured the support of the Chechen public. If the rebels today command a more profound emotional legitimacy among the Chechen people, they have only the Russian army to thank.

By the fall of 2002, Russian public opinion polls indicated waning support for the war. But the dramatic terrorist hijacking of a Moscow theater re-galvanized public opinion against the Chechens - among both the elites and the masses - and assured continued hostilities. In 1999, it was the militants' raids into neighboring Dagestan and the Moscow apartment bombings that catalyzed public outrage against Chechnya. Moderate Chechen civilians no doubt realize that terrorist acts provoke more hostility, not appeasement, but the conduct of the Russian military drives them toward supporting the militants. To solve this problem, Russia should pursue a policy of progressive warfare which, by separating the people from the militants, can help re-channel the discontent of the Chechen masses away from Russia and toward the extremists among them.

The failure to curb civilian violence is not unique to Russia. Every time an Israeli helicopter gunship kills a dozen bystanders to eliminate a Hamas leader, it perpetuates a cycle of anger and violence. But by carefully distinguishing militants from civilians (through targeted assassinations, perhaps), Israel could re-channel Palestinian public discontent towards the radical factions within, which can only promote Israel's own security interests. Or, as Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's current Finance Minister and former Prime Minister, said in September of this year, "The test of whether we're moving toward peace will come not when we fight the terrorists, but when the Palestinians fight the terrorists among them."

In Russia, the generals might claim to have military history on their side. Total warfare, in which civilians are considered legitimate targets, has been the norm for most of civilization, in the West and elsewhere. The Romans engaged in "punitive wars" against

conquered peoples because there was a pressing need to allow the underpaid Roman legions to plunder and rape as a reward for their battlefield sacrifices. During the times of the Crusades and the internecine religious warfare within the Christian and Muslim worlds, civilian terror was justified with charges of heresy. Nationalism, by making every resident a contributing part of the state, legitimated civilian murder as aiding in the defeat of the country as a whole. Generals throughout the ages, it would seem, embraced warfare against civilians as a way of instilling fear in the heart of every man, woman and child, while weakening the fighting spirit of their enemies.

But a history of the origins of progressive warfare reveals otherwise. It wasn't altruistic humanists like the 17th-century Dutch jurist Grotius or pious philosopher-clerics like St. Augustine who actually pushed military reform onto the path of limited civilian engagement. Instead, it was military men like Sir John Falstaff, an English royal advisor during the Hundred Years War. Falstaff campaigned against civilian warfare because he realized that antagonizing the very people he was trying to control was militarily counterproductive. "If the excesses of war were to be mitigated," writes military historian Caleb Carr, "it was not going to be through appeals to religion or morality made by priests; soldiers themselves would have to devise ways of controlling the excesses of their men, in an effort to stop the erosion of civilian loyalty."

Throughout military history, limiting military depredations on civilians was a cause taken up by military men - people like Frederick II of Prussia, who transformed the European theater of battle into a place governed by rules not because of any distaste for barbarity, but because of practical military considerations. Helmuth von Moltke, creator of the modern general staff system, pursued a policy of progressive warfare for the same *realpolitik* reasons.

With this in mind, it's not hard to see why Israel's highest-ranking military officer, Lt. Gen Moshe Yaalon, recently declared that his own country's policy of violence against Palestinians is worsening the situation. "It increases hatred for Israel and strengthens the terror organizations," he said. "In our tactical decisions, we are operating

contrary to our strategic interest."

Unfortunately, no such admissions are forthcoming from the Russian military. Even a supposedly "progressive" general like Makhmud Gareev, President of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, bestows much skepticism upon what he calls the "Americanization" of the Russian forces.

And that's too bad, because the military practicality of progressive warfare, wherein civilian casualties are minimized as much as possible, is especially important today when wars of occupation have replaced wars of conquest. One must conquer not only a territory, but the "hearts and minds" of its occupants as well. To do so successfully, soldiers must be able to distinguish between combatants and civilians, supporting the latter while fighting the former.

One successful precedent for such military policy is the U.S. war against the Philippine guerillas at the end of the 19th century, which Max Boot in his book *The Savage Wars of Peace* called "one of the most successful counter-insurgencies by a Western army in modern times." As Brian McAllister Linn wrote in his acclaimed history of the war (*The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902*), "It was only when the Army could separate the guerillas from the civilians and prevent guerillas from disrupting civil organization that social reform was possible."

Progressive military warfare demands, first and foremost, a progressive and professionally-trained military. But as Lieven has noted, the Russian military today bears a closer resemblance to a third-world African army than the forces of a regional power. Obviously, there are no easy answers for the conflict in Chechnya. But one promising long-term solution would be to professionalize the Russian military, whose structure and equipment has stagnated for the past twenty years. The soldiers are poorly trained, scared and cynical. They do more to perpetuate the conflict than to end it. They drink, loot, rape and sell weapons to the very people who are trying to kill them. (As an American *mujahed* who fought in Chechnya told me

last year, "As long as the Russian army stays in Chechnya, we will be able to buy arms.")

A policy of total warfare against the Chechens has been a remarkably consistent element of Russian military tactics since the mid-18th century - from Tsarist to Soviet to modern times. In the days of General Yermolov during the early 19th century, the harsh punishment of civilians drove them into the arms of Islamic leaders like Kazi Mullah and Shamil'. The damage of these centuries will probably never be repaired. But if Russia wants to obtain a modicum of legitimacy among the Chechen population, it must discipline its forces. It should create clear chains of command and institute court-martial procedures for soldiers who commit human rights abuses. Not in the name of human dignity - although that too, one hopes, should play a role - but in the name of its own self-interest and security.

The lessons of Chechnya apply to Iraq as well, where the U.S.-led Coalition forces have undertaken a strategy to mount more lethal and high-profile counterstrikes in response to increasing resistance. But if this tactic results in increased civilian casualties, as it very well might, any benefits gained from a tough stance will be overshadowed by the increasing dissatisfaction among the Iraqi people. In a post-war occupation, civilian unrest is more important than militant insurgency because it legitimizes and perpetuates the resistance. A recent CIA report confirmed as much, stating that the Iraqis are losing faith in the occupation forces, which is in turn increasing support for the insurgents. By ignoring civilian needs, the U.S. now finds itself in the dangerous position of repeating the mistakes of Russia in Chechnya and Israel in Palestine - mistakes that have turned both conflicts into prolonged and irresolvable quagmires.

If enough houses are destroyed and if enough people are killed or injured, Iraqi civilians will find themselves aligned with the militants. Once that is the case, the terrorists will become far more entrenched and difficult to find. The Allied forces have been doing a good job of keeping civilian casualties to a low through high-precision bombing. They certainly have not pursued any deliberate attacks on civilians or their property the way Russia's army has done. But in a setting of

precarious legitimacy, the cultural divide between the forces and the Iraqi people is too great to prevent potentially fatal mistakes. "Collateral damage" is no longer a byproduct of war, but an important factor in determining its long-term success, and the military planners should pay it more heed.

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