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Karrada: stopping Baghdad's nightmare©
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This week's Karrada shopping mall bombing is the consequence of failed strategy in Baghdad and Washington during 2006-2008, when Iraqi cities could have been secured using technologies available in London, Dubai, Tel Aviv, Singapore and elsewhere.

The tragedy is that Karrada is an easy neighborhood to protect with urban security systems. It's a peninsula surrounded on three sides by the Tigris River and a narrow land entry. A car bombing in Karrada, or any Baghdad neighborhood, shouldn't be happening in 2016.

A little background.

One of the prescient ideas following the occupation of Iraq from 2003 was the introduction of the Iraq Reconstruction and Management Office (IRMO).   The US State Department hired several executives with international turnaround and large scale project experience to manage civilian reconstruction. We were mostly men and women in our 50's or those approaching retirement, with functional expertise in electricity distribution, oil production, civil engineering, transportation, telecommunications – my experience - and a variety of other services that we take for granted in the United States, Europe and most of Asia in the 21st century.

IRMO executives were supposed to have reconstruction project control, but the program's chain of command passed through both the State Department and the US military.   So while the State Department would assign a retired ambassador as the IRMO boss reporting to Ambassador Ryan Crocker, by the military assured that the group was controlled by an army Major General reporting to General David Petraeus, the commanding general of the Surge in 2007 -2008.

IRMO made immediate reconstruction progress working with Iraqi scientists, engineers and politicians. Within a short time, most Iraqis, for the first time had access to the Internet and mobile phones, ports and transport systems were functioning, innovative agricultural and important water distribution projects underway.

Regrettably, progress wasn't uniform. Despite the efforts of a very experienced executive, electricity distribution was limited to as little as four hours a day. The US Army slow rolled the protection of electricity pylons coming into Baghdad, blown up nightly, "we're warriors, not tower guards", etc.,

alienating the populace and delegitimizing American effectiveness and control, leading to more attacks on the US military.

Imagine the frustration and anger in Phoenix on the hottest days of the year without street lighting, home electricity and air conditioning, for weeks and months, and eventually years.

Worse, most people in Baghdad were under attack from religious and political factions. Shia were exercising violent retribution for 30 years of suppression under Sadam. Sunni, and Baathists, were exercising violent retribution on Shia and the United States Army, for being dispossessed of their government and military roles by Paul Bremer almost immediately after the end of hostilities.

In a particularly chaotic period in mid-2006, Mohammed Allawi, became telecommunications minister, replacing the first woman telecom minister, Jowan Masum, who became an advisor to the Kurdish president. Masum had replaced Haidar Al Abadi, now prime minister of Iraq. Each had done a respectable job in getting the first cell phone systems operational, and had moved on to important political roles. But much more reconstruction and development was needed.

One of Mohammed Allawi's first acts was to form a committee to study how telecommunications could provide a safer security environment for Baghdad's citizens, who were being killed and injured in horrendous numbers almost daily by car bombers. Allawi possesses an unusual moral and diplomatic authority in Iraq, through earlier work as an international mediator and peacemaker. He ran a cross-sectarian ministry of Sunni, Turkmen, Kurds and Shia, working cooperatively and effectively.

Together, Allawi's committee, my Embassy reconstruction team, members of Petraeus's telecommunications support group, and a group of Pentagon communications planners on temporary duty in Baghdad, devised a network plan to secure Baghdad from car bombing and begin to track car bomb manufacturing facilities, using surplus network equipment already in Baghdad.

We were hosted by the Metropolitan Police in London to review traffic control patterns developed after the Canary Wharf bombing, and analyzed city traffic security plans in Singapore, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv. We met with companies that built camera and data storage technologies, and Cisco Systems to review network design techniques.

Initial contact was made with Alpine data centers in Switzerland and Austria for holding data files so that information couldn't be used for sectarian advantage. We had the first meetings between the US Embassy and China's creative Huawei network designers in Baghdad .

I visited the Pentagon and US National Defense University to brief their policy and communications officials - all ok'd – followed by meetings with the World Bank and donor embassies, especially noting Japan's very generous financial support of Iraq's first national microwave network. Ideas about urban security were discussed with experts at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, and more.

This was the most elaborate multi-national civilian city security scheme ever conceived for a post conflict environment. It was a system designed by many of the world's best engineering and

transportation security experts.   To implement and operate the system would cost less than one day of military activities in Iraq. It would provide employment to young engineering graduates from Baghdad's universities, and contracts to the small group of Iraqi IT entrepreneurs beginning to spring up in Iraq in this period.

The test bed for the system was the Karrada peninsula, the closest thing in Baghdad to a normal neighborhood, and the home of Baghdad's children's hospital and the University of Baghdad.   The system would expand throughout Baghdad as the operators gained experience.

To begin we needed the support of the Coalition Military Authorities for minor support, in particular the use of one US Army helicopter to check some of the initial surveys in Karrada. This meant briefing the commanding general, David Petraeus.

As I recall, the briefing took place in April 2007, a couple months after Petraeus arrived. He entered the meeting room with several colonel aides, as always with a cordial greeting.   I explained the program using maps generated by the Embassy's cartography experts.

I was astounded to learn that the system wasn't needed. "I could eat a steak dinner in Karrada tonight", not the only comment during the meeting, but the flippancy remains etched in my mind.

It was true that Karrada was relatively safe, which was why it was selected for the beta test. Petraeus wanted a short term solution in a much more violent neighborhood to support his Surge, a counter insurgency strategy of "boots on the ground" promoted by Australian strategy consultants, apparently based on Britain's experience in Malaysia in the 1950's.

The requirement was certainly understandable in the context of Petraeus's his mission, but beta testing a multi-national civilian security project in a more violent neighborhood would be impossibly dangerous for everyone.   And even before it started, the Surge was considered in Baghdad to be a short term political expedient, and few people outside of the Embassy and US military headquarters were interested in participating. Nevertheless, by the time I returned to my office twenty minutes later the project was "postponed until after the Surge".

We know the result. "Boots on the ground", while respecting the soldiers endangered, doesn't supersede imaginative strategy.

After ten years it's no longer acceptable to regret that a bombing took place in Karrada this week, or hundreds of other places in Baghdad in the last ten years, or that Karrada's children's hospital was bombed six months into the Surge.

Now - today - there is a moral imperative to fix a known condition leading to multiple weekly atrocities. Please don't send your "heartfelt" sympathy again. The world is tired of hypocrisy. Only resolute and sustained action will resolve this debacle.

It should be obvious by now. There can't be peace and stability in the Middle East until there is a safe and thriving Baghdad. Baghdad is the fulcrum of the Sunni-Shia split. Iraq is the geographical center of

all United States problems in Eurasia. The mistakes made in Baghdad are where ISIS begins and could end.

But the road to peace isn't paved with drones, bombing campaigns, and political machinations alone.

Peace starts with making neighborhoods like Karrada safe and expanding safety throughout Baghdad and into other cities, and eventually into Syria, with jobs and policing. The technical plans are easily replicable and the systems are more intelligent and less expensive ten years later.

Iraqi engineers and technicians are perfectly capable of running an urban security system. Until the disruption to Iraq's education system during sanctions after the First Gulf War, Iraqi engineers were employed in high level positions around the world. But now young Iraqi engineers need multi-national help.

Europe has a role. China, in particular, has benefited from oil contracts, market access to sell commodities, and Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant, installed major parts of the Iraq's Internet.   And just to make an explicit point concerning China's foreign and trade policy: without a safe Baghdad the New Silk Road to Europe stops in Tehran. China has a lot to offer.

 But the United States has the greatest obligation to participate.

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