

Copying Failure: from Palestine to Iraq

By

William R. Polk

Six weeks ago, Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez, the commander of the United States ground forces in Iraq began to implement a new, more severe and more comprehensive strategy. His forces began to encircle whole villages and small towns in razor wire, to arrest not only suspected guerrillas but also their families, to blow up or bulldoze buildings thought to be used by insurgents and to explode powerful “war” weapons, even 220 kg. bombs delivered by jet, in place of relatively limited infantry firepower.

These are the tactics that Israeli forces have used in the occupied Palestinian territories for many years and were taught to American officers by Israeli Defense Ministry officials prior to the American invasion of Iraq. Some of the Israeli “control doctrine” was employed early in the occupation, but the full panoply of tactics and weapons have been employed only in the last few weeks.

According to Brigadier General Michael Vane, the deputy chief of staff at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, writing in the American military journal, *Army*, the Defense Department sent a special mission to Israel last summer to “glean lessons learned from their counterterrorist operations in urban areas.” The U.S. army had concluded its effort at counter-insurgency had not gone far enough; it wanted to move further and faster along the path staked out by Israel.

A critical feature of the Israeli system is an identity card. This has now been mandated for Iraqis. The card being introduced in Iraq contains a photograph of the person, his name and a number, all written in English. Residents of encircled towns generally are not allowed to pass through the wire entanglements more than a few hours each day, are then thoroughly searched and have their identities checked against their cards. “This [new system] is absolutely humiliating,” a school teacher in one of the now isolated towns told *New York Times* correspondent Dexter Filkins. “We are like birds in a cage.”

However, Iraqis react, there are many signs that the attitudes of the American soldiers have hardened into fear and hatred as a result of repeated attacks. Now, as in Vietnam, virtually all civilians, even women and children, are regarded as potential bomb carriers. Many have been killed in what the Iraqis maintain is indiscriminate shootings or even sniper assassinations. The inevitable growth of alienation was summed up by one army officer when he said, “The only thing they understand is force – force, pride and saving face.”

Almost every known occupation of an area by foreign forces projects a duplicate of events now happening in Iraq. What is ironic there is that the Israeli teachers of the

occupation tactics are, themselves, now admitting that the tactics they taught the Americans not only do not work but also damage those who use them.

In a remarkable series of statements, Israelis from the chief of staff, Lt. General Moshe Ya'alon, down to individual soldiers are speaking out against their government's policies and tactics. General Yaalon, who as recently as a few months ago argued for a harsh policy toward the Palestinians, "war to the end," has now reversed course. On October 30 in a briefing for Israeli journalists, he said that his government's policies and tactics were "contrary to our strategic interests." As he elaborated, the more severe the suppression, the more the Palestinians will hate the Israelis and support attacks on them. Such tactics will lead to permanent war.

A month later, four now-retired former directors of the Israeli domestic security service, known as *Shin Bet*, echoed General Yaalon's press briefing. The four men had directed the security forces for most of the last twenty years and had formerly been regarded as among the "hardest" men in Israel. Each was known as a supporter of assassination of alleged guerrillas, pitiless tactics against civilians suspected of supporting them, isolation of villages, constant raids, imposition of check points and other policies that Palestinians felt were humiliating and which diminished their ability to earn a living. Some of these are the tactics now being employed in Iraq.

Perhaps even more impressive than their discussion of tactics was the issue these Israeli leaders raised of the effects on Israelis. As Major General Ami Ayalon, the director of *Shin Bet* until three years ago, commented, the tactics risk destroying the moral fiber of the nation. As he said, "Much of what we are doing today...is immoral..."

The Israel Defense Force has always been considered to be the "heart" of Israel. Prime Minister David Ben Gurion also thought of it as the means to convert Jewish refugees drawn from a variety of cultures into Israelis. Of all Israeli institutions, the Defense Force is the most purely Jewish. As one Israeli said to me, "it is not loyal to Israel – It is Israel." It is partly for this reason that Israeli citizens of Arab descent are rarely inducted into it.

Yet today, nearly 600 soldiers and reservists have signed statements refusing to serve in the occupied territories. Hundreds more are reported to have asked for reassignment. An even larger group has publicly criticized Israeli tactics as "dehumanizing" and "degrading." The former head of armed forces education, General Nehemia Dagan, warned that what is being done is corrupting Israeli soldiers and said that "The ethics and morals of Israeli society are more important than killing the heads of Hamas or Islamic Jihad."

The men making these criticisms are not pacifists and certainly are not equivocal on Israel's right to exist. For example, one of the most highly decorated pilots in the Israeli air force, Brigadier General Yiftah Spector, who shot down some 15 Arab aircraft, led 26 other current and former pilots to oppose "illegal and immoral orders to attack...civilian population centers." When Spector and a number of others were

dismissed from the air force, he hit back saying, that the government was “deaf, blind and stupid” and that military force could not create security. Several of the elite officer-pilots, according to a report in *The Guardian*, described the dropping of a one ton bomb on a house in Gaza, an attack that killed a number of children, “as deliberate killing, murder even. Another called it state terrorism...we should not behave like that. We are not a mafia.”

The Israel Defense Force is not alone. The former speaker of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, lamented in a New York Jewish journal that “The Zionist revolution has always rested on two pillars: a just path and an ethical leadership. Neither of these is operative any longer. The Israeli nation today rests on a scaffolding of corruption, and on foundations of oppression and injustice.”

The problem, all these Israelis agree, is that the tactics of suppression corrupt those who use them; ironically, it is they, the powerful, who are harmed as much or perhaps even more than the victims.

Of course, America did not really need to study at the Israeli “school.” Vietnam had provided many lessons, and, in fact, was thoroughly studied by the Department of Defense. Millions of Vietnamese were killed, and the whole country pulverized by bombs and cantoned into “strategic hamlets.” Yet the war was lost. And, the effect on the men who took part was brutalizing. Among many “search and destroy” units was the “Tiger Force” of the 101st Airborne division. It was to gather intelligence but in doing so terrorized or killed scores of people. It is paralleled today in occupied Palestine and in Iraq by semi-secret elite forces. Doubtless, they too are leaving behind a trail of hatred.

The American Army took President Bush at his word when he said, in early July of this year, “There are some who feel like the conditions are such that they can attack us. My answer is bring ‘em on! We’ve got the force necessary to deal with the security situation.”

As the security situation deteriorates, the Iraq commander, General Abizaid, threatened “other measures.” As Colonel Dale Davis, a former Marine Middle East Specialist and Counterintelligence officer, speculated, “I wonder what ‘other’ measures are now under consideration. House demolition? Forced re-settlement? Limitation of movement? Any variety of group punishments already exercised with complete failure by the Israelis?”

In the coming weeks, actions like these are likely to fill the press.

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