

## WALLING OFF IRAQ: ISRAEL'S IMPRINT ON U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE

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Since the U.S. military's 2007 adoption of a new counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, popularly known as "the surge," the most conspicuous development on the Iraqi political landscape has been a surge in walls. From Baghdad to Mosul, the U.S. military has rapidly constructed scores of massive concrete walls, barriers and checkpoints between and around Iraqi neighborhoods and cities. Euphemistically referred to as "gated communities," vast areas of Iraq have been sealed off behind concrete walls and sand berms. In Baghdad alone, 12-foot-high concrete walls separate and surround at least 11 Sunni and Shiite communities, and even now subdivide Sadr City.<sup>1</sup> Often covered with graffiti and broken by narrow checkpoints where soldiers monitor traffic via newly issued ID cards and biometric scanning devices, these walls have turned Baghdad into dozens of replicated Green Zones, dividing neighbor from neighbor and choking off normal commerce and communication. During a visit to Baghdad's Dora neighborhood, journalist Nir Rosen observed,

Looming over the homes are twelve-foot-high security walls built by the Americans to separate warring factions and confine people to their own neighborhood. Emptied and destroyed by civil war, walled off by President Bush's much-heralded "surge," Dora feels more like a desolate, post-apocalyptic maze of concrete tunnels than a living, inhabited neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

And high above the looming walls, the U.S. military has dramatically increased its use of airpower through unmanned aerial reconnaissance drones and frequent missile strikes.<sup>3</sup> Although overall measurements of violence in Iraq may have numerically declined, Iraq has become increasingly caged within an archipelago of isolated ethnic enclaves surrounded by walls and razor wire and reinforced by an aerial occupation.

This surge in walls and isolated enclaves rests uneasily with the proclaimed tenets of the highly publicized new counterinsurgency doctrine developed by academically trained officers with Ph.D.s, such as General David Petraeus, Lt. Col.

John Nagl, and Australian anthropologist/counterterrorism advisor David Kilcullen, and outlined in the new *U.S. Army/ Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (FM 3-24).<sup>4</sup> In sharp contrast to Donald Rumsfeld's heavy-handed military approach to the Iraqi insurgency, the new doctrine prescribes winning the "hearts and minds" of the population through minimizing the use of force, improving security, and cultivating human relationships in order to divide the population from the insurgents and facilitate a political solution. Billed as "armed social science" and allegedly based on the "lessons of history" of twentieth-century counterinsurgent warfare from such varied battlefields as Malaya, Kenya, Algeria and Vietnam, the doctrine is based on the premise that there are ultimately no military solutions to what are at root political wars.

Yet, while the military touts its increased use of embedded anthropologists and "human terrain systems" teams as examples of this new culture-friendly approach, the cornerstone of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq today is less about cultivating human relationships or political solutions than about limiting and imposing them, primarily through concrete walls backed by increased violence from the skies above Iraq.

This surge in walls and enclaves suggests that the primary "lessons of history" being followed by the U.S. military's actual counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq today derive less from Malaya, Algeria or Vietnam, than from Israel's urban-warfare laboratory in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip over the past decade.

The parallel with Israel is not simply the tactic of erecting the walls themselves,

although this is its most obvious feature. Indeed, over the past decade, Israel has adopted and refined a controversial new pacification strategy in response to Palestinian armed resistance and suicide bombings. It has erected hundreds of miles of separation walls and high-tech fences and over 400 checkpoints across occupied territory that enclose Palestinians within an archipelago of enclaves in order to separate them from each other and from illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land.<sup>5</sup> This strategy is maintained under a blanket of aerial surveillance and deadly unmanned drones, backed up by frequent airborne assassinations and strikes. Although Israel withdrew its army and settlements from Gaza in 2005, its 1.5 million Palestinians are now living within an enclosed cage, while Israel controls access to the essentials of life through high-tech border terminals and unleashes "penetration raids" and airborne "targeted killings" when resistance is offered.

This parallel between the United States and Israel is frequently noted by many Iraqis: "This wall makes us feel as if we were in Palestine," said Iraqi protestor Akram al-Ani at a demonstration against the first wall built around Baghdad's Adhamiyya neighborhood. "And this is the same wall that separates Palestinians from Israelis."<sup>6</sup> Visiting the Sunni enclave of Amriya in Baghdad, Nir Rosen's Iraqi driver pointed to a gap in the new concrete walls surrounding Amriya: "We call it the Rafah Crossing," referring to the one gate from besieged Gaza to Egypt that the Israeli army occasionally allows to open.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the parallel with Israel runs deeper than walls. The emulation of many obviously Israeli-derived tactics and techniques in Iraq today is the product of a growing

convergence between the Israeli and the U.S. military over the past few decades on how to fight insurgencies.

Counterinsurgency doctrine was largely banished from the U.S. military playbook after the defeat in Vietnam. Efforts to erase the specter of that war embodied in the mantra “No More Vietnams” left a major gap in institutional doctrine. But over the past two decades, Israeli technologies, tactics and even strategic doctrines have increasingly become a default paradigm and source of emulation. This process only accelerated with American involvement in Arab and Muslim lands after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, and has become particularly apparent during the occupation of Iraq.

Behind the use of Israeli-style walls and enclaves in Iraq there appears to be a deeper U.S. embrace of a new post-Vietnam strategic doctrine regarding counterinsurgent warfare that bears many similarities with Israel. It is based on the belief that violent insurgencies against foreign military occupation can actually be defeated through shifting military tactics rather than through a political solution that addresses the root of the insurgency, namely an end to foreign occupation.

The sheer scale and impact of American wall building in Iraq indicates that these structures are not merely a temporary tactic to win popular support or lead to political reconciliation. Like Israel's strategic use of walls to literally engineer a political solution that erases Palestinian national-territorial contiguity and preserves Israeli settlements deep within Palestinian land, the walls in Iraq formalize the break-up of the country into sectarian enclaves that may be impossible ever to reunify.

The resulting “soft-partition” of Iraq seems to be one final effort to engineer an environment favorable to salvaging important strategic U.S. goals such as maintaining permanent military bases, institutionalizing U.S. influence over petroleum resources, and creating a compliant regime beholden to U.S. power. To paraphrase Clausewitz, walls are an extension of war by other means.

Thus, the central problem in Iraq is not simply that our American scholars-in-arms have cribbed from the Israeli counterinsurgency playbook; it's that this playbook is at odds with the real lessons of counterinsurgency history, which could actually provide a way out of the Iraq quagmire. The only solution to anti-occupation insurgencies is a negotiated end to foreign occupation itself. Counterinsurgency may be considered the graduate level of warfare, but its Israeli-style application in Iraq is based on an elementary-school understanding of both the lessons of history and political reality.

### **ISRAEL'S MODEL, FROM SOMALIA TO IRAQ**

The largely overlooked tactical and doctrinal convergence between the United States and Israel regarding counter-insurgent warfare over the past few decades is largely the result of a self-inflicted doctrinal aversion regarding counterinsurgency within the U.S. military after its defeat in Vietnam. In its effort to banish traces of its historic defeat, the U.S. military largely abandoned efforts to institutionalize lessons learned in order to develop a better doctrinal approach to counterinsurgency. This resulted in almost exclusive focus on conventional warfare. As the military scholar Robert Cassidy pointed out in a recent study,

Thus, the U.S. army, by either default or design, or both, did not institutionalize the lessons from its most recent combat experience in Vietnam. Instead, the army looked to research and analysis, exercises and field tests, and the historical experiences of World War II to prepare it for what it saw as the next war — a high-intensity mechanized war in Europe. Propitiously, the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 served as surrogate laboratory of recent combat experience in the U.S. army's preferred kind of war. TRADOC [the leading military strategy institute] studied the lessons of the war very closely and incorporated those lessons into U.S. Army doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Although the smashing conventional victory in the 1991 Gulf War struck a major blow against the post-Vietnam American popular aversion to foreign military interventions, it also reinforced the existing aversion against counterinsurgency in favor of conventional war.

But new U.S. military deployments in Lebanon, Somalia, Haiti and then in the Balkans in the early 1990s provoked a longer-term recognition that the future of war was likely to include unconventional and counterinsurgent warfare, and a growing strategic desire to find a way to “win” such conflicts.

In this context Israel emerged as a default model for how to directly fight insurgencies, especially after the “Black Hawk down” debacle of 1993 in Somalia, which led U.S. military strategists to rethink their approach to fighting urban warfare in Third World “battle spaces.” In the following years, according to urban theorist Mike Davis, Israeli advisers were brought in to teach Marines, Rangers and Navy Seals the

state-of-the-art tactics against urban insurgencies that Israel was using to suppress Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>9</sup> At that time, the United States had an almost dreamy regard for Israel's military acumen: lightning victories on the battlefield, ruthless pursuit of enemies, and intelligence agencies worthy of great deference.

More important, however, this default tactical “Israelization” of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine was also accompanied by what Davis terms a deeper strategic “Sharonization” (referring to Israeli militarist and later prime minister Ariel Sharon) of the Pentagon's worldview. U.S. military strategists began to envision the capacity of innovative counterinsurgent warfare to contain and possibly defeat insurgencies rooted in Third World urban environments. Sharon is known to have kept by his bedside a well-thumbed Hebrew edition of Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace*, an account of the failed French effort to defeat the Algerian insurgency against French colonial occupation. While many viewed the French defeat as proof of the futility of military solutions to anti-colonial insurgencies, Sharon's belief was that Israel could learn from Algeria to get right what the French did not.<sup>10</sup>

In similar terms, strategists within the U.S. military began to reconsider the mantra “No More Vietnams.” Perhaps one could learn from that mistake to successfully engage in future counterinsurgency wars. Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, one of the intellectual authors of the new counterinsurgency doctrine, illustrated this trend with his 2002 book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, which sought to apply lessons to future U.S. conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

The growing convergence between U.S. and Israeli military tactics and even strategic doctrine regarding counter-insurgent warfare has only accelerated since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The search for new means to confront urban insurgencies and terrorism in predominately Arab and Muslim lands heightened the institutional resonance between these two militaries under the banner of “the war on terror.” It has gone so far as to create what the Palestinian academic Marwan Bishara has termed a new “strategic cult” in which Israel’s “asymmetrical war” against the Palestinians became seen as a continuation of the U.S. “war on terrorism” in both theory and practice.<sup>12</sup> Many senior officials in the Bush administration viewed Israel as the paradigm of the militarized and aggressive Western power that it sought to emulate in applying “shock and awe” to the allegedly brittle region.

One key element in the embrace of a distinctive Israeli war-fighting doctrine was the abandonment of concepts of deterrence in favor of pre-emptive war and what Israeli strategists call cumulative deterrence. The model for action is to aggressively accumulate individual victories (“assets in a victory bank”) that reduce the enemy’s material capabilities over time and diminish its resolve to fight.<sup>13</sup> That deterrence is ill-suited to deal with a terrorist threat like al-Qaeda was a central motif of the Bush approach after 9/11. Bob Woodward describes a meeting of President Bush and his top advisers shortly after the attacks: “It was a somewhat obvious but an important point that got to the heart of the problems they [Bush and his advisers] were facing — lack of good targets, lack of inside intelligence sources, the worth-

lessness of deterrence strategy.” All of this prompted President Bush to conclude, “Our strategy is more like that of the Israelis.”<sup>14</sup>

Learning from Israel’s experiences centered on the need to acquire new precision weaponry and airborne warfare technologies and develop a tactical emphasis on urban warfare, as well as other elements of Israel’s fighting style in the new “asymmetrical” battle spaces. The rush to war in Iraq accelerated the linkage with Israel even further. According to *The Independent’s* Justin Huggler, Israel’s unprecedented assault on Palestinian cities and the refugee camp in Jenin during “Operation Defensive Shield” in April 2002 was keenly observed by foreign militaries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom as they geared up to invade and occupy Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

But the most direct application of Israeli tactics took place in Iraq after the United States found itself mired in urban guerrilla warfare and suicide bombings in fall 2003. Having banished counterinsurgency doctrine from its own playbook after Vietnam, the Pentagon turned to Israel, among other sources. According to the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh,

One step the Pentagon took was to seek active and secret help in the war against the Iraqi insurgency from Israel, America’s closest ally in the Middle East. According to American and Israeli military and intelligence officials, Israeli commandos and intelligence units have been working closely with their American counterparts at the Special Forces training base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and in Israel to help them prepare for

operations in Iraq. Israeli commandos are expected to serve as ad-hoc advisers — again, in secret — when full-field operations begin.

As a result, American forces frequently adopted a new set of tactics that appeared to have come straight out of the Israeli playbook from the occupied Palestinians territories, including physically enclosing villages within razor-wire fences, bulldozing homes of suspected insurgents, destroying irrigation systems and agricultural fields, taking civilian hostages and using torture to extract intelligence. Underlying the new strategy was the conviction that only a tougher approach would quell the insurgency and that the new strategy must not only punish the insurgents but also make clear to ordinary Iraqis the cost of not cooperating. Seymour Hersh claims that the United States was told it had to “go unconventional” like the Israelis, to use harsh tactics to counter the harsh insurgency. As he summarized it: “The American-Israeli liaison on Iraq amounts to a tutorial on how to dismantle an insurgency.”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the most emblematic policy in this respect was the isolation of entire villages in “hostile” areas, surrounding their residents in razor wire with strictly controlled entry and exit points. In a highly publicized incident in mid-December 2003, an American unit implemented what it had learned of Israeli tactics against Abu Hishma, a town of 7,000 Iraqis. After a number of shooting incidents, the town was surrounded by barbed wire, its men were issued mandatory identification cards, and checkpoints were established. *New York Times* reporter Dexter Filkins noted: “Such tactics are undeniably similar to those used by the Israeli army to control angry Pales-

tinians — and the Abu Hishma residents know it.”<sup>18</sup> Filkins quoted a young Abu Hishma Iraqi: “I see no difference between us and the Palestinians . . . . We didn’t expect anything like this after Saddam fell.”

The U.S.-Israeli tactical liaison in Iraq only grew as the insurgency deepened, leading to the further adoption of Israeli technologies and urban-warfare tactics across Iraq. Israeli-style weapon systems and tactics were clearly utilized during both assaults on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, particularly with the use of airborne strikes in dense urban quarters.<sup>19</sup> During the second assault on Fallujah in November 2004, the U.S. military used many tactics clearly modeled on the Israeli assault on the Palestinian Jenin refugee camp in 2002. For example, U.S. Marines and Iraqi forces, in what was called a “dynamic cordon,” ringed the city with checkpoints in an attempt to fix the insurgents in place as remotely piloted surveillance drones circled overhead on the lookout for stockpiled car bombs. They led with tanks, which broke through enemy lines and drew out the insurgents, while D-9 bulldozers, a staple of Israeli actions in the West Bank, plowed through enemy positions. Infantry bypassed booby traps and snipers by traveling through holes in breached walls, another well-known Israeli innovation.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, *The Guardian* also reported that Israeli advisers helped train U.S. Special Forces in aggressive counterinsurgency operations such as the use of assassination squads against insurgent leaders, a program long sought by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.<sup>21</sup> One former senior American intelligence official raised serious tactical and political concerns about the dangers of adopting

Israel's "hunter-killer" teams, and the political implications of such an open embrace of Israel: "It is bonkers, insane.... We're already being compared to Sharon in the Arab world, and we've just confirmed it by bringing in the Israelis and setting up assassination teams." Confirmation of this strategy, with no mention of Israel's role, came in January 2005, when *Newsweek* reported that U.S. advisers in the Interior Ministry were instituting a program of systematic assassination of leaders and supporters of the resistance, including prominent Sunni clerics and political leaders. The program was dubbed the "Salvador option" because of the similarities with the right-wing assassination squads that committed thousands of murders in El Salvador and other Latin American countries two decades earlier.<sup>22</sup>

### A SURGE IN WALLS

The U.S. military's use of many harsh Israeli tactics, along with a broader array of often destructive and counterproductive methods, was nothing less than a complete failure. Iraq slipped into anarchy and then raging civil war, recounted with devastating clarity by *Washington Post* reporter Thomas Ricks in his well-regarded book *Fiasco*.<sup>23</sup> And like Palestinians, Iraqi insurgents developed new means to counter the asymmetrical power of the American occupiers, resorting to suicide bombings, car-bombings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to wreak havoc and prevent the occupation from taking hold. The limits of employing harsh military force to impose victory on a recalcitrant population opposed to foreign occupation were no more apparent than in Iraq. Learning a lesson far too late in the game, a "Special Forces veteran who

speaks Arabic" summed up the situation this way: "Across Baghdad, Latifyah, Mahmudiyah, Salman Pak, Baqubah, Balad, Taji, Baiji, Ramadi and just about everywhere else you can name, the people absolutely hate us. . . . The Iraqi people have not bought into what the Americans are selling, and no amount of military activity is going to change this fact."<sup>24</sup>

Instead of returning to the lessons of Vietnam and rapidly moving to bring the war to a close through negotiations, however — the clear preference of American voters in the fall 2006 congressional elections and central to the recommendations of the James Baker-led Iraq Study Group — the Bush administration tasked the U.S. military to update, revive and repackage the classical doctrine of counterinsurgency that had been shelved after Vietnam. This time they were determined to "win." The vehicle for this very political project was Gen. David Petraeus and his highly touted cadre of counterinsurgency (COIN) experts. They were fresh from a six-month command-and-staff course on counterinsurgency at Fort Leavenworth that, according to Robert Fisk, included at least four senior Israeli officers.<sup>25</sup> Along with a fresh deployment of 30,000 troops, the "surge" of 2007 was born.

In theory, the centerpiece of the new U.S. counterinsurgency strategy is the time-honored tactic of "clear, hold and build": To win popular support, secure zones, separate the population from insurgents and improve the quality of their lives through economic reconstruction projects. The purest example of this strategy is the British approach during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60). It also includes Vietnam's infamous "strategic

hamlets” strategy and elements of the French-derived *tache d’huile* (oil spot) strategy used in Algeria. As each village or district was secured, it supposedly would merge with other spots until the entire country was under control. From the “lessons of history” of insurgent warfare, General Petraeus frequently noted that “there is no military solution” to the conflict in Iraq. He insisted that military action was only necessary to improve security for political progress to take place.

In practice, however, the “surge” has more closely mirrored Israel’s strategic pacification approach of wall building and enclave construction deep within occupied Palestinian territory. This illustrates both the continued U.S. embrace of very specific Israeli tactics, as well as the new strategic view shared by Israel that it can actually “win” a war against an insurgency by employing new tactics to salvage strategic goals, rather than finding a political accommodation that would lead to an end to occupation.

The idea of “gated communities” to bring Iraq and Baghdad security was initially floated as a centerpiece of the new strategy in January 2007.<sup>26</sup> According to American officials, an Iraqi precedent for this strategy was Tal Afar, a city of 150,000, where American forces built a huge sand berm around the perimeter to control access, then swept through it block by block to clear it of insurgents. The first direct application of this tactic in the “surge” was most likely in late December 2006 in Haditha, one of the war’s deadliest and most infamous battlefields in Anbar province. There Marines built huge sand berms stretching 20 kilometers around Haditha. Iraqi police backed by U.S. marines then checked all travelers and

vehicles on the single road in and out of the town, requiring written permission signed by U.S. marines to leave or enter. Some U.S. military officers reportedly recognized the obvious similarity with Israel’s separation barrier in the occupied West Bank but were wary about drawing too close an analogy. Said one interviewed officer: “Probably some of it does come from Israel, or at least the ideas behind it. We use the same bulldozers as they do, although I think we’re a little more gentle. We don’t run over any homes.”<sup>27</sup>

The most dramatic application of the Israeli-style walls-and-enclave strategy occurred in Baghdad in April 2007, when the U.S. military walled off over ten of Baghdad’s most violent neighborhoods for several months.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, the checkpoints between the walled enclaves included plans for troops armed with biometric scanning devices to compile a neighborhood census by recording residents’ fingerprints and eye patterns and issuing special badges or ID cards.<sup>29</sup> This kind of data gathering — mapping the social terrain — is a well-known element in classical counterinsurgency efforts. “Control of the population begins obviously with a thorough census,” wrote David Galula, who wrote *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* in 1964, based on his experience in the French war in Algeria. The book became a cult classic among thousands of military officers and was cited as a central text in the new counterinsurgency field manual.<sup>30</sup> It is also a mainstay of Israeli occupation practices in the West Bank and Gaza, where Israel maintains records over the most detailed aspects of Palestinian daily life.<sup>31</sup>

American wall building has since spread across Iraq, including even to the

northern city of Mosul, where 1.4 million people have been sealed off from the outside world. Its alleyways are blocked by barricades and its only new buildings are huge concrete slabs.<sup>32</sup>

While the new counterinsurgency doctrine in theory prioritizes security as a means of empowering civilians and promoting political reconciliation, the wall strategy simply enables the free movement of foreign troops and mercenary forces to enforce a virtual state of siege. For many Iraqis, the Americans have turned their land into a prison; while they are meant to keep the bombers out, the walls also keep residents penned in. This new strategy has been met with outrage and protest by average Iraqis, often citing the analogy with Israel. "One road in and one road out, that's it," said Ghazaliya resident Muhammad Rajab. "Iraq is a prison, and now I live in my own little prison."<sup>33</sup> An Adhamiyya resident linked the walls to Palestine, "Adhamiya will be isolated from all the other areas. We'll be like the Palestinians, and we do not accept that."<sup>34</sup> The initial protests were so fierce that even U.S.-backed Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ordered a halt to the initial construction of walls in Baghdad and asked for consideration of alternative methods to protect these areas. He was quickly brought into line by American pressure.<sup>35</sup>

Serious doubts about the walls have even been raised in the generally pro-occupation blogosphere of counterinsurgency experts and insiders, who frequently work or consult with the U.S. military. One of the most heated contributions came after the highly esteemed counterinsurgency guru David Kilcullen posted a spirited defense of the "gated communities" strategy on the

widely read *Small Wars Journal* website.<sup>36</sup> Adopting the antiseptic language of a physician concerned with the need for "stabilizing the patient" of Iraq, Kilcullen averred that "Gated Communities in counterinsurgency are like tourniquets in surgery." Although he recognized a political downside to such a draconian strategy, he claimed that "the security controls are not permanent and can readily be removed. They do not create a ghetto." But, in response to Kilcullen, the respected counterinsurgency commentator Matt Armstrong wrote a riposte posted on the widely read *Wire Magazine* blog "Dangerroom." He argued that resorting to walls in no way squares with a counterinsurgency doctrine aimed at establishing legitimacy and confidence among the population, whatever the short-term gains emphasized by Kilcullen. "Neither political nor military doctrine nor logic can justify this folly," he wrote. Calling out Petraeus and Kilcullen in particular, he asked, "How could they not have anticipated the visceral linkage with Israel's wall in the West Bank by the audience in the Middle East?"<sup>37</sup>

#### **WALLS: WAR BY OTHER MEANS**

The Bush administration and U.S. military officials tout the significant decrease in overall levels of violence within Iraq brought about by the "surge" as a signifier of "progress." Yet the sheer scale and harsh impact of U.S. wall building in Iraq today indicate that the walls are not merely a temporary tactic in the early phases of the proclaimed "clear, hold and build" strategy to win popular support. They are more clearly a pacification strategy to secure political ends.

The most telling indicator of the deeply political and strategic nature of walls is that they are formalizing the ethnic break up of Iraq. Though these walls helped to temporarily dampen sectarian violence, they have bolstered sectarianism, isolating Iraqis from their neighbors and leaving them dependent on militias like the Mahdi Army for food, supplies and protection.<sup>38</sup> The millions of Iraqis who have been displaced and exiled as a result of the U.S. occupation and sectarian violence will only have new ethnically homogenous “gated communities” to return to, if they ever do. The resulting “soft-partition” of Iraq appears to be the final throw of the dice in a U.S. effort to salvage strategic and political gains from its initial blunders. The U.S. strategy is more akin to “clear, hold and divide.”

In this sense, then, the tactical shift towards walls, enclaves and aerial power is still rooted in the convergence between Israeli and U.S. strategic doctrine regarding insurgencies that has developed since the Vietnam War; that is, the belief that one can actually use military force to defeat an insurgency by reformulating one’s military tactic’s, rather than through political solutions. Ignoring the lessons of history, neither Israel nor the United States is willing to countenance a serious political solution to either occupation. This would entail addressing the core political issue that is driving each insurgency: the foreign occupation itself.

The overall aims of each occupation differ in some ways. Israel’s is more authentically colonial and aimed at the dispossession of Palestinians from their land, while America’s is more imperial, aimed at imposing strategic control within and over Iraq and its resources, but both

Israel and the United States are seeking to use walls to replace direct military occupations with a form of occupation management in order preserve the fruits of their respective conquests.

With its erection of walls and Ariel Sharon’s much lauded “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005, Israel has simply shifted tactics in order to achieve its original goal of securing illegal Israeli settlements and land confiscations in the West Bank and maintain “greater Israel.” Since Israel remains unwilling to accept a withdrawal to the 1967 borders and allow for a fully sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel, its current strategy is to pacify Palestinians through ever-expanding walls and enclaves until Palestinians finally accept their fate of living under indirect Israeli control. As Sharon’s top aide, Dov Weisglass, put it at the time, in language eerily similar to the that of U.S. counterinsurgency experts: “The disengagement . . . supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians.” Moreover, in reference to the exact purpose of the disengagement plan, Weisglass stated: “The significance is the freezing of the political process. And when you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda.”<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, since the United States is unwilling to negotiate with the Iraqi insurgency or consider a time-table for withdrawal, one must conclude that the new counterinsurgency strategy is primarily a

tactical effort to pacify Iraq through establishing a “soft partition” of local and provincial alliances along ethnic lines. The hope is that this will enable the United States to secure its original goals of establishing permanent military bases, securing influence over Iraq’s vast oil fields and installing a compliant central government to ensure these aims. Like the Palestinians, Iraqis will be sequestered within separate and often walled enclaves so that the political and economic occupation can remain in place. The formalization of “soft partition” will come when and if the United States and its client government in Baghdad sign a controversial “Status of Forces Agreement” that would legalize nearly 60 U.S. bases on Iraqi territory, grant the United States rights to launch military operations without Iraqi-government oversight and thereby institutionalize extensive U.S. influence over Iraq’s petroleum reserves.

### THE REAL LESSONS OF HISTORY

There is great irony in the U.S. military’s post-Vietnam return to counterinsurgency doctrine: it has only perpetuated its failure to learn fundamental historical lessons. The central lesson, outlined in William Polk’s salutary new book on the history of insurgent wars in this century, *Violent Politics*, is this: counterinsurgency rarely works on behalf of a foreign occupation because it can never garner the requisite political legitimacy to win over a population to accept its interests.<sup>40</sup> In the twentieth century, no foreign occupier has ever been able to defeat a nationalist insurgency, Algeria and Vietnam being the two most obvious and prescient examples.

But there is a more specific lesson relevant to both the Israeli and American resort to walls and enclaves to secure

gains from their respective occupations. Historical attempts to use pacification techniques of spatial incarceration to defeat insurgencies have never been truly successful. As Polk points out, this strategy was tried in Malaya with fortified villages, in Algeria with concentration camps, in Vietnam with strategic hamlets and in Kenya with detention camps. With the possible exception of Malaya (where the insurgents were largely ethnic Chinese who were themselves foreigners), these actions only further undermined any claim to legitimacy on behalf of the foreign occupiers. As the editors of the *Pentagon Papers* wrote regarding the U.S. pacification strategy in Vietnam, “The strategic Hamlet Program was, in short, an attempt to translate the newly articulated theory of counterinsurgency into operational reality. The objective was political though the means to its realization were a mixture of military, social, psychological, economic and political measures. . . . The long history of these efforts was marked by consistency in results as well as in techniques: all failed dismally.”<sup>41</sup>

Many Iraqis have also read the writing on the historical walls. “The policy of walls is wrong,” a tribal leader in Iraq told Nir Rosen. “The Americans think that they are providing security for the people. But what is the use of safety? If a man is hungry, he will do bad things because he is hungry.”<sup>42</sup> Other Iraqis are even more blunt: “Americans and Iranians have succeeded in realizing their old dream of dividing the Iraqi people into sects. That is the only success they can talk about.”<sup>43</sup>

Even more problematic is that, instead of learning from its own historical experiences, the United States has naively looked to the Israeli experience for the actual

practice of counterinsurgency. The United States continues to be mesmerized by a mythical version of Israel that is based more on savvy marketing than demonstrated performance. Israel's responses to unconventional war have never been well developed or very successful. It was defeated by Hezbollah in South Lebanon not once but twice. Its attempt to crush the Palestinian uprising through force actually led to further suicide bombings, while its destruction of the Palestinian infrastructure has left the political field open to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israel is arguably more insecure now than it has ever been.

Martin Van Creveld, the respected Israeli military historian who frequently lectures U.S. military officials on military strategy, warned in 2003 that, just as Israel

had been unsuccessful in eliminating militant groups and suicide bombers, the United States cannot expect to be victorious in Iraq. "The Americans are coming here to try to mimic all kinds of techniques, but it's not going to do them any good," he reportedly warned. "I don't see how on earth they can win. I think this is going to end the same way Vietnam did. They are going to flee the country hanging on the strings of helicopters."<sup>14</sup>

The new U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, especially as outlined in the new manual and put into practice in Iraq, is therefore mostly a menu of historically uninformed tactical ploys that, in the context of the widespread illegitimacy of foreign occupations, can only bring cosmetic and temporary pacification.

<sup>1</sup> Sam Dagher, "Baghdad Safer, But It's a Life behind Walls," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 10, 2007; Hamza Hendawi, "Baghdad's Walls Keep Peace But Feel like Prison," Associated Press, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/06/27/iraq/main4214647.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Nir Rosen, "The Myth of the Surge," *Rolling Stone*, March 6, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See Josh White, "U.S. Boosts Its Use of Air-strikes in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 2008; Associated Press, "Report: UAV use has doubled over 9 months," January 3, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24; Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5) (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The best single account of Israel's wall, fence and enclave strategy and its related techniques is by the Israeli architectural critic and political theorist Eyal Weizman. See Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Alissa Rubin, "Outcry over Wall Shows Depth of Iraqi Resentment," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Nir Rosen, "Inside the Surge," *The Nation*, April 3, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War* (Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Davis, "The Pentagon as Global Slum Lord," [www.TomDispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com/), May 2004, (<http://www.tomdispatch.com/>).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Fisk, "Bush Is Doing Nothing to Stop Israel's Immoral War," *The Independent*, March 9, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> John Nagel, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Marwan Bishara, "The Israelisation of America's War," *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), Issue No. 583, April 25 - May 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Major General Doron Almog (Israel Defense Forces), "Cumulative Deterrence and the War on Terrorism," *Parameters*, Winter 2004/2005; Vol. 34, No. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 88-89.

- <sup>15</sup> Justin Huggler, "Israelis Trained US Troops in Jenin-Style Urban Warfare," *The Independent*, March 29, 2003.
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Tough New Tactics by U.S. Tighten Grip on Iraqi Towns," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2003.
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- <sup>20</sup> See especially Ch. 7, "Urban Warfare: Walking through Walls," in Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, (Verso, 2007), pp. 185-220.
- <sup>21</sup> Julian Borger, "Israel Trains U.S. Assassination Squads in Iraq," *The Guardian*, December 9, 2003; on Rumsfeld's determination to use this tactic and Israeli guidance, see Seymour Hersh, "Moving Targets," *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2003.
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