

BY STEVE ISRAEL

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Over Thanksgiving, I visited remote combat bases in Afghanistan. I came home sadly convinced that six years after 9/11, the Taliban has gained strength in key areas and remains a potent threat against us. It's time to redeploy the maximum possible number of troops from Iraq to Afghanistan and return to the battlefield where the 9/11 attacks were born.

One of my principal concerns about the Bush administration's handling of Iraq has been the lack of public attention to Afghanistan and the blurring of both military theaters in the American consciousness. The terrorists who masterminded and executed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that killed thousands, including dozens of my constituents, were trained in Afghanistan.

In that same country, Osama bin Laden led and fled. Afghanistan heard the opening shot of the global war on terror. Now that shot seems like a mild echo against the violent rumbling in Iraq.

Today the Taliban remain a strong, sustained and flexible presence in parts of Afghanistan. They are shifting locations, importing foreign fighters, recruiting adherents and improving the technologies they use against us and the Afghan people.

Local populations are not inherently "pro-Taliban," but they fear Taliban reprisal if they associate with coalition forces. They believe that once we leave their region, they'll no longer be protected and will be punished for assisting our efforts. In other words, many Afghan civilians are hedging their bets that the Taliban will have a sustained presence in the region, while coalition forces will come and go.

The United States has a history of using soft power to "win the hearts and minds" of civilians in a military theater. We usually do it by building bridges, lighting streets and providing services to enable security. Our military presence in Afghanistan initially had been very effective in accomplishing these aims.

But the problem now is that we believed we could build a bridge, repair a street, turn on the lights and that people would live with more security and with alternatives to violence. What we overlooked is that once we left a region, the insurgents reappeared. And not only did they blow up the bridges and turn off the lights, they retaliated against those who weren't loyal to them.

The way to render the Taliban plans against us impotent is to gain enduring local support against them. That means we must demonstrate not only an alternative to terrorists, but also a future without terrorists. Simply killing Taliban fighters in an Afghan region, then building a sewage system and leaving will not kill the Taliban movement or build a lasting peace. As soon as the coalition departs for another area, the Taliban return.

Therefore, we need long-term and widespread investments in combat power, economic development and public infrastructure.

Unfortunately, our military presence in Iraq has provided a major obstacle to our progress in Afghanistan. We simply don't have the resources to provide sustainable security in Afghanistan. Ultimately, the Afghan National Army and local police must develop a capacity to protect local populations, but if our coalition bases have severe shortages of reliable local security, that training will never take place.

That's why we must redeploy the maximum number possible of U.S. forces from Iraq into Afghanistan, where the war on terror began. There are 48,000 international troops operating in Afghanistan today, and half of these are American. Even sending an additional 12,000 U.S. troops in from Iraq would make a dramatic difference on the ground there.

But we don't have the resources to secure Afghanistan alone. Some of our troops in Iraq are serving their third or even fourth tours of duty and need to return home. We must engage in a "diplomatic surge" to ask other nations to commit additional assets in Afghanistan.

Specifically, we must ask the 26 NATO countries and others that have already contributed troops to increase their presence in Afghanistan. And as countries like Australia reduce their presence in Iraq because of political circumstance at home, the United States should make the case that their troops would be well used fighting al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

With even modest increases we could easily double our current presence in Afghanistan. And that would increase our effectiveness against the resurgent Taliban.

On my last day in Afghanistan, I saw three small children pressing against the security fence at Fire Base Tycz. They were asking for candy. Those kids are growing up amid the Taliban and will likely be recruited to join them. In a few short years they'll be choosing between trying to blow up buildings in New York or trying to build peaceful lives in Afghanistan.

They're the new front in this war, and we need to deploy serious resources to protect them - which will protect us.