

‘The Cycle of Violence Is Going To Be Accelerated’ in the Mideast

U.S. Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni (ret.) was from 1997 to 2000 Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Central Command. A highly decorated veteran, he joined the Marine Corps in 1961 and served two tours in Vietnam. He was involved in the planning and execution of Operation Proven Force and Operation Patriot Defender in support of the Gulf War. He has participated in presidential diplomatic missions to Somalia, Pakistan, and Ethiopia-Eritrea and was the former U.S. Peace Envoy to the Middle East, involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and conflicts in Indonesia. He was interviewed on March 25 in Washington, D.C., by EIR’s White House correspondent William Jones.



EIR: Why don’t we start off with Iraq? Is this becoming a quagmire? Can we get out of it, and if so, how?

Zinni: I think what has to be done is to get the UN involved in the political reconstruction and direction. I think it’s good that [Lakhdar] Brahimi’s in there, UN representative; and that he’s taken the lead on dealing with the leadership from each of the factions, and working with them toward an election. I think we ought to step back from that, and let the UN take the lead.

We should not put this mega-embassy on the ground—4,000 [personnel]—we should have a small embassy, like we would anywhere else in that region, and not look like we’re still there with a large contingent.

And I think the military presence ought to be just based on, as long as the interim government in Iraq, and then the final government after elections—if they desire us to be there, fine; if not, we should turn this over to Iraqi security forces.

What we need help on from the international community is training Iraqi security forces. Not just military and police, but border security; local installation security, like guards and night watchmen, and this sort of thing. I think that ought to be the priority, and we ought to ask for help on that.

We need to do more consultations out in the region. We have been, I think, negligent in not talking to our friends in the region out there, that are the neighbors that have to live with this, and ask for their input, advice, help on this. And maybe they could even help with some of the training of Iraqi security forces in their part of the world.

And then I think, on the economic side, we’ve got to get businesses started up; make sure they have the protection; and start getting jobs. This is what’s going to encourage the Iraqis to work with it.

Those are the three things: It’s moving the political process under the UN; it’s lowering our profile—getting help from everybody else to build up the Iraqi security forces a lot faster than we are now; and it’s getting foreign investment and Iraqi businesses going, so that you can create jobs, so that the Iraqis themselves have something to fight for and to commit to, and not let their country go south.

If we keep going like we’re doing, and insisting on being in charge and running everything, we’re just going to have more of the same of what we have now, if not worse.

EIR: Do you think other countries—the European countries or other countries of the UN—would be prepared, at this point, to send any military forces there?

Zinni: I don’t think they’re going to send military forces, unless we have a turnabout and say that the UN, and these countries, are going to have a say in the political reconstruction and the economic reconstruction. As long as we stiff-arm them on that, they’re not going to want to put boots on the ground, and put their soldiers at risk, if they’re not going to have a say in that. So that’s what it would take.

But right now, what may be more important, especially in the longer run, is not so much that we flood it with more foreign troops; but that they bring in the trainers, and the people that can put more Iraqi battalions, policemen, border security—you know, if they could help establish training locations, facilities, even maybe take some out to their own countries and train them through officer course, technical courses on law enforcement, and everything else—I think the high priority ought to be to train as much of a professional security force at all levels—military, policy, border security, and everything else—for Iraqis. And to ask them to contribute and to help us with that.

But again, it's going to take us getting a UN resolution and showing that we're willing to step back and let the UN and others work the political reconstruction and economic reconstruction.

EIR: Are you confident that the different ethnic groups, especially the Sunnis and the Shi'a, will be able to work together on this reconstruction?—the Kurdish thing is probably a little bit different—but that there really is not a fundamental problem that they can't resolve, in terms of maintaining a unitary country?

Zinni: Well, there's probably going to be friction. But you know, they've committed themselves, at least publicly, to try to work together and to keep Iraq together. I think it's important that we have people on the ground—especially people with credibility, like Brahimi from the UN, who is an Arab—that try to help work out these differences where they come out. They've got a long way to go to get their final constitution, their final electoral process determined, and it's going to take a lot of diplomacy and a lot of work with them. I don't think any of those groups are insistent on splitting apart or creating a separate state. I think obviously in the case of the Shi'a, they want more representation; the Kurds want autonomy; but you have to find a formula where everybody gets what they want, but they manage to stay together in some sort of federal system.

That's just going to take a lot of jawboning and a lot of work. I think they're inclined to want to do it that way. I haven't seen anybody that says, "We want to split off and create our own state." Of course, you're going to have all these extremists and *jihadis* in there, that are really trying to generate the perception amongst the Sunnis that they're going to be punished for Saddam, that they're going to be the victims. And they're attacking the Shi'a and the Kurds to try to generate this friction. So you've got to work against them. The biggest work may have to be with the Sunnis, to convince them to reject these people that are attacking everybody else, in effect, in their name.

EIR: There's been a lot of attention focussed on the hearings of this [Sept. 11, 2001] Commission. And I understand that you yourself had actually given testimony. What is your consideration: Did we, especially because of the neo-cons' interest in the Iraq issue from the get-go—as soon as the Bush Administration took over, they started talking about this—find that this was a diversion from what should have followed up on the initial operations in Afghanistan?

Zinni: I think it certainly was a distraction. I'll tell you what I said when this first came up, well before the war: Saddam is contained; if you want to deal with Saddam, now was the wrong time; you had too much on your plate; you've got to get Afghanistan right and deal with the extremist problem, and you have other issues like the Middle East peace process and many other things out there that need to be fixed before

you deal with Saddam; and then, if you were going to deal with Saddam, you need to do it through the UN, the way we've always done it before, and they've always delivered the authority to use force. You need to be patient to let the inspectors play out.

And then, if you decide you're going to go in and take down the regime, you'd better understand what you're getting in for. They way underestimated. They didn't have a plan. They made a whole bunch of mistakes on the ground, like disbanding the army and de-Ba'athifying down too deeply, and taking the exiles we supported out of London and proping them up in there. And they continue to make these same mistakes.

And the amount of resources and troops that were distracted from the war on terrorism; the credibility of the Administration by creating a false rationale with WMD, to go in; and then the breaking of the alliances we've had, and the friendships we've had, and the coalitions we've used in the past. I don't think there's any place I go in the world, where I find any people that really agree with what we did—the anti-American sentiment and objection to our policy is so strong *all over the world*, that we created a problem that has made this whole situation far worse because of this adventure, this "elective surgery."

EIR: What is your impression of the so-called chase in Afghanistan—I don't know if they're chasing Osama or al-Zawahiri, or who they're going after—but they don't seem to have come up with anything. What is your impression in looking at the operations that are being conducted, largely by the Pakistanis, but also I guess there are some U.S.—

Zinni: Well, you know, I think that President Musharraf, in order to commit to this level of operation and go into those territories, he had to make sure that he had tensions calmed down with India; that his own internal economic and political situation was stable; and I think a lot of things had to happen before he was ready to take that on as a higher priority, like we would have liked to have seen. And he's arrived to that point now.

They're going to learn that they have to be careful about what they, maybe, suspect is in these places. But going in there and cleaning out the rats' nests, and asserting his authority within those villages and those tribal areas, but doing it in a way that he doesn't break a lot of china up there, is something that he has to work out. But it's necessary. We need to take away that sanctuary. And I'm glad to see it happening, and at the scale that he's doing it.

We need to continue to help him, because he does this at great risk within his own country. It's not popular to do this, because many Pakistanis felt the Americans abandoned them after the Afghan war against the Soviets. We left them with all these refugees and problems, and then put sanctions on them. And so there's a lot of bitterness still left over. He's taken a lot of risk in supporting us in the face of that. And



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we've got to show him that we can be good allies, and be thankful and appreciative of what he does.

EIR: Looking back on the situation in Afghanistan—back to when we were aiding the Afghans against the Soviets—didn't we make a mistake in trying to use the *mujahideen*, and the same characters who we're having trouble with today, when we gave them arms?

Zinni: Well, you know, as Henry Kissinger once said, most of the time, you find yourself trying to choose between the lesser of two evils. In those days, the big evil was communism. You know, through covert action, we got rid of an elected government in Iran, and propped up the Shah, because we thought the government might be leaning toward communism. We brought the Shah back in, and that ended up becoming a disaster, and we ended up with the Ayatollah.

There's a lot of criticism of people we support around the world, sometimes, that are not the best leaders and the best form of governance, because the alternative looks worse. And in the end, you never know what that's going to lead to. It could lead to a worse situation in the end. So it's easy to look back at history in reverse, and say, "Well, that was bad, the *mujahideen*, we created a problem." But at the time, that's what we had to deal with, in trying to

stop Soviet hegemony from spreading, and communism from spreading.

EIR: Turning to the Middle East: Now we have the assassination of Sheikh Yassin, and it seems that that really is going to set something off which could have been gotten under control, to the extent that the United States was still deeply involved in the Mideast peace process. What do you think will be the net effect of the assassination of Sheikh Yassin?

Zinni: Well, it's going to unleash a whole series of violence. The cycle of violence is now going to be accelerated as a result. I think you're going to see a lot of Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Al-Aqsa attacks; you're going to see retribution attacks by the Israelis. And we're going to go through another sort of spiralling cycle of violence.

Certainly, the Israelis upped the stakes in doing this now. And there's going to be a counteraction to that. It then pushes the peace process way further back from any chance of moving in a positive way. And we're going to go through a bad patch here, I think.

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trying to fathom what he's trying to get at. I don't think anybody there believes that there's a military solution to all this. And it's difficult to see how this is going to play out. The blood is up, and there's no hope. And if you get to the point of despair, you could have a true insurgency on your hands, which I think they're on the verge of in the Palestinian Territories. It could be a long Summer.

EIR: The other aspect of that is this attempt by the Administration to introduce this new "Greater Middle East" policy, which was kind of shot down in mid-stream, with the ideal of "democracy everywhere."

Zinni: Reform—political, economic, social reform—needs to happen in this part of the world, but it needs to happen in a way that, culturally, they can put into effect. And it needs to happen at a pace that they can handle. This idea that we walk over, and we just dump Jeffersonian democracy on top of them, and expect, tomorrow, that this is going to bear fruit, is just unrealistic. And I think we ought to engage with them; we ought to encourage it; we ought to support it, help with the resources, work with them—but they each need to do it at their own pace.

And there *is* some reform and change happening. In places like Kuwait, and Qatar and Bahrain, they're creating parliaments; women are getting the vote and being allowed to run for office; they've reformed some of their economic systems out there and made them more diverse, and there's foreign investment coming in. There's a lot of things that are happening. We need to find a way to encourage that, and let it seek its own level.

There will be a form of democratization, and free-market economies and things that will happen; but it will probably have an Arab Islamic character to it. And as long as it's stable, and it's representative, and it's acceptable to the people, I think we ought to be satisfied with that.

Very few democracies around the world look the same. You have parliamentary systems, bi-cameral systems, representational governments, one man-one vote democracies. There are variations to this, and we ought to allow for that sort of character that they bring to it with their own cultural considerations, to work out there.

EIR: In the broader picture of the United States in the war on terrorism: There's been a lot of deployments, as in Central Asia, where you've, of course, had a lot of experience in CENTCOM. And there are fears rising, because of the extended duration of the time the United States seems to be there—fears especially in places like Russia, but also to some extent in China—that we're now getting into a kind of new "Great Game," given also the propensities of the Administration, at least in a lot of their public formulations, to push their pre-eminence doctrine, and the like. It seems to give a credence to this. Do you see a possible conflict, say between Russia and the United States, might occur over this?

Zinni: No. I don't think it would happen. I think we ought to give reassurances: Our forces are there based on the need to deal with the problems in Afghanistan. I don't think that we have any intention to have a permanent presence out there. It's not in our interest to do that. And I think we just need to communicate to them that we're there because there's destabilizing things that go on, that we have to deal with, that affect us all.

And I think the Russians may be a little bit leery, more afraid that we're going to exert more influence in that part of the world—especially when you begin to look at the Caspian, and some of the natural gas and oil reserves, and that sort of thing. They're going to keep an eye on us.

But I don't think anybody, realistically, believes—nor would we ever want to—that we're going to put permanent military positions out there in Central Asia. Of all places in the world, I would think that would be the last place we would want to do it; we don't really have vital national interests out there that warrant permanent presence of troops, once we deal with this terrorism problem.

EIR: It certainly wouldn't be the first place that people would want to be.

Zinni: No, I don't think you'd sign up for a tour in, Tashkent, you know?

EIR: One other issue. Now we've had these bombings in Madrid. Now that the ETA has been eliminated as a possibility, people are talking about a Northern African Muslim connection. But there also have been at least some indications, on the European side, that they're looking at much of this old network, the old right-wing fascist and neo-fascist networks around the Falange; that we had this kind of thing in the 1970s and 1980s, a "strategy of tension." What is your estimate on the Madrid thing?

Zinni: I think, clearly, it was some sort of *jihadi* group. If it was a North African, Moroccan-based group, or something like that, it's probably an extension of al-Qaeda. It probably has some sort of al-Qaeda support or provision of resources, or capabilities, planning, or whatever. I think this has all the hallmarks of the al-Qaeda network, although the group may be a separate group. But what al-Qaeda does, is it recruits its foot-soldiers from all these disparate groups around the world, and gives them the resources they need, the training, the logistics, the planning, to do things like this. And certainly, the encouragement and support they need. So, I think that's what happened.

EIR: In another area that you probably know a good deal about, although I don't know if you were stationed there—the Latin American situation: They've also had, in places like Colombia, it seems, a relatively successful war on terrorism under [Colombian President Alvaro] Uribe in dealing with narco-terrorism.

Zinni: Yes.

EIR: But the economic problems seem to overwhelm that situation often enough. If you look, for instance, at Argentina and some of these other countries; how do you see the progress in the situation in Latin America?

Zinni: I don't follow Latin America that closely. Obviously, I think that if you're going to wean them away from coca production down there, you've got to give them an alternative. They need much more stability on the political side, and certainly, much more on the economic side, in economic development. That's the key in the long run. The same in the Middle East and elsewhere. It's got to be political reform, economic reform, that really pulls away the cannon fodder you need to become guerrillas or terrorists, or whatever, or members of drug cartels.

EIR: Do you think, now, with everything that's happening in Iraq, that this idea of creating an American empire—which was floated in a lot of the think-tanks and magazines about a year ago—has now been shot down a bit?

Zinni: Yeah, and I think that in the nature of the kind of empire they were talking about, it was ridiculous.

We do have an empirical presence. It's because we're the last remaining superpower, and we have a great deal of influence around the world. And so it's an empire, not of conquest, it's been an empire of influence. And if we're smart, we would use that influence to build multilateral, cooperative, collective approaches to dealing with problems, instead of unilateral, pre-emptive ones.

I kind of like what Bush, the elder, did at the end of the Cold War. The first problem we ran into was the Gulf situation, when Saddam invaded Kuwait. He [Bush] very carefully crafted a methodology that lasted right up until the Iraq War. He went to the UN and got a resolution to authorize the use of force. He had the international legitimacy. He spent a great deal of effort and time in creating a masterful coalition, especially from the region, of Arabs and Islamic nations, and European nations. He stayed within the limits of the resolution. He didn't go to Baghdad, because it was outside the resolution.

And, you know, here we used our power and influence; but we used it in a way that we gained the international legitimacy we needed. We built the coalitions and did it collectively.

That model was used in Haiti, Somalia, Kosovo; we brought NATO in; in places like East Timor, we supported the Australians in the lead, under this same structure.

That security structure, everybody was very comfortable with. And we, as the greatest power in the world, reinforced it, supported it, promoted it; and everybody worked within that. We held the sanctions against Iraq and Iran under that model.

And then all of a sudden, we come along in this Iraq thing, and we rush to war, and we break the model. And I think that was a mistake. That's the *wrong* application of your power, in that empirical sense, than the way I think Bush, the elder, "41," constructed it and Clinton followed with.

EIR: Do you think that either the Clinton or the Bush Administration ignored some of the signs with regard to Sept. 11, and the buildup of the real terrorist threat?

Zinni: Well, I lived through this. I think everybody expected, after 1998, when Osama bin Laden issued all those *fatwas*, that al-Qaeda had transformed itself into a bigger threat.

I think it was seen as sort of a regional threat. And I think after 1998, everybody realized it was going to become much more significant, and it would even stretch outside the region. I think everybody understood there could be a possibility that they might get to the U.S.; but no one imagined they would do it in that way.

And I gotta say—having lived through this—it's very easy to have 20-20 hindsight. It's very easy for people to go on TV, and say, "I was a Chicken-Little, screaming about all this." But the intelligence was never there.

Look, Clinton wanted, badly, to get Osama bin Laden. We shot missiles in Afghanistan, we shot them into Khar-toum. And this was on very, very weak intelligence, in my view. The Agency [CIA] and others were breaking their backs trying to get more information. It just wasn't there. We didn't have the assets on the ground. We didn't penetrate the organization. We couldn't get the timely intelligence. We couldn't get the kinds of intelligence that you could act on, either special operations or bombing.

And some of the stuff I heard yesterday, on this testimony [to the Sept. 11 Commission]: In my mind, it reminded me of a bunch of blind men feeling an elephant, and trying to describe it. From their narrow perspective, they may have been saying the right thing. But when you put it all together, it wasn't that clear. It was a lot vaguer.

And you could see, within our own government, the inability of agencies to cooperate and work together and communicate—not because there weren't good people; but the system doesn't allow for that to work the way it should.

So I think it's always easy to go back, in hindsight, and say, "You should have seen this, or you should have seen that"; but if you weren't there, I don't think any of the Presidents—Bush, Clinton, Bush, the elder—ever ignored this problem. They just never had enough to work with, that they could act on it. And that, being intelligence.

EIR: OK, we've covered a good deal. Thanks very much.

Zinni: Thank you.

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