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10 years after the Iraq invasion, Washington still hasn't learned

by Stephen Zunes

Perspective

This month marks the 10th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which has resulted in the deaths of up to half a million Iraqis, mostly civilians, and the displacement of millions of others. Sectarian and ethnic tensions remain high and violence and terrorism -- despite being less pervasive than a few years ago -- are endemic. The current Iraqi government is notoriously corrupt and repressive, guilty of widespread torture and extrajudicial killings of opponents. A whole new generation of Islamist terrorists radicalized by the invasion and insurgency is now active worldwide.

Almost 4,500 Americans were killed and thousands more received serious physical and emotional injuries that will plague them for the rest of their lives. The war has cost U.S. taxpayers close to \$1 trillion, contributing greatly to the national debt, which has resulted in the sequester and other cutbacks in vital social programs.

Despite all this, 10 years later, some of the same politicians in Washington who pushed us into war a decade ago are trying to do so again. This time, with Iran.

Back in early 2003, pro-war members of Congress could not convince Americans to support such an illegal and unnecessary war for the sake of oil and empire. Instead, they had to repeat the Bush administration's lies about Iraq being a threat to U.S. national security through its alleged acquisition of massive stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, the development of a nuclear weapons program, the acquisition of long-range missiles and drone aircraft, and operational ties with al-Qaida. As they were forced to admit later, absolutely none of those claims were true.

While Congressional Democrats voted against the war authorization, a right-wing minority -- including such prominent senators as John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Dianne Feinstein and Harry Reid -- joined with Republicans in passing that fateful resolution.

Those who voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq did so despite the fact that it violated international legal conventions to which the U.S. government is legally bound to uphold. The resolution constituted a clear violation of the United Nations Charter, which, like other ratified international treaties, should be treated as supreme law according to Article VI of the U.S. Constitution. According to Articles 41 and 42 of the U.N. Charter, no member state has the right to enforce any resolution militarily unless the U.N. Security Council determines that there has been a material breach of its resolution, decides that all nonmilitary means of enforcement have been exhausted, and then specifically authorizes the use of military force. Article 51 allows for the use of force in self-defense, but only in the case of a direct armed attack until the U.N. meets to determine an appropriate international response.

The Iraq War authorization not only constituted an effective renunciation by Congress of the U.N. Charter's prohibition against such wars of aggression but a repudiation of the post-World War II international legal order. Indeed, a bipartisan majority voted down alternative resolutions, such as one authorizing force against Iraq if authorized by the U.N. Security Council.

Members of Congress were also alerted by large numbers of scholars of the Middle East, Middle Eastern political leaders, former State Department and intelligence officials, and others that a U.S. invasion would likely result in a bloody insurgency, a rise in Islamist extremism and terrorism, increased sectarian and ethnic conflict, and related problems. Few people I know who are familiar with Iraq were at all surprised that the U.S. invasion resulted in such tragedies. Indeed, many of us were in communication with congressional offices and often with individual members of Congress themselves in the months leading up to the vote, warning of the likely consequences of an invasion and occupation. Therefore, subsequent claims by supporters of the war that they were unaware of the likely consequences of the invasion are completely false.

It seems hard to believe, then, that many of the same senators are trying to get us into war again.

Earlier this month, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), backed by a bipartisan group of senators -- including Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and dozens of others -- introduced a nonbinding resolution (Senate Resolution 65) calling for President Barack Obama to support military action against Iran if the Islamic republic simply develops what is deemed to be the capability of building nuclear weapons, regardless of U.N. authorization and other legal questions and regardless of the horrific humanitarian, environmental and political consequences that would result.

War game simulations and other studies have consistently shown that strikes on suspected Iranian nuclear complexes and related facilities would kill tens of thousands of Iranians and many hundreds of Americans, further cripple Iran's pro-democracy movement, disrupt international trade, provoke international terrorism, and perhaps lead to a regional war.

According to former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, "The results of an American or Israeli military strike on Iran could, in my view, prove catastrophic, haunting us for generations in that part of the world." Furthermore, he confirmed the assumption of most arms control analysts that "such an attack would make a nuclear-armed Iran inevitable. They would just bury the program deeper and make it more covert."

Alireza Nader, an Iran analyst with the RAND Corporation, noted, "The U.S. intelligence community judges that Iran has not made the political decision to create nuclear weapons. An Iranian nuclear weapons capability is not imminent." Unfortunately, he notes how the Senate resolution could send the message to the world "that the United States is not serious about solving the nuclear issue peacefully."

Once again, then, we have a bipartisan group of senators pressing for war against an oil-rich Middle Eastern nation, exaggerating the alleged threat, refusing to consider the consequences of war, and dismissing the caution of experts.

One would have thought that, 10 years after the disastrous invasion of Iraq, politicians in Washington might have learned their lesson.

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