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ARC OF CONFLICT

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Following President Obama's Cairo speech at the end of May, developments in an arc from Iraq through Iran to Afghanistan have all raised significant issues for the US administration and the wider international community. All involve unexpected developments that may have an impact over several years.

Iraq

At the end of June the US military forces in Iraq completed a withdrawal of organised combat units from the cities to a small number of large bases mainly located in rural areas. In practice many combat troops stayed in a different guise, being concerned primarily with training and support operations rather than visible patrols, but there was a symbolic as well as a security significance in the change. This was because the Maliki government used the opportunity to represent the change as an end to occupation, with celebrations organised in many cities. This was very much a case of Iraqis taking charge rather than being on the receiving end of a hand-over of power. It was an unexpected but interesting reflection of the prevailing opinion in Iraq that the last six years has indeed been a time of occupation, a view that is very different from the original US attitude of regime termination being an aid to liberty not occupation.

Although the security situation across most of the country improved in the eighteen months up to the beginning of this year, the more recent experience has been one of increased violence in the centre and north of the country, this being of two forms. One has been a substantial number of car and truck bombs that have mainly targeted Shi'a communities and have most likely been designed indirectly to undermine the Shi'a-dominated government. The other has been a rise in direct attacks against Iraqi security forces, especially in and around the city of Fallujah.

In both cases, the violence has been aided by a perception in the minority Sunni community, previously the elite sector of Iraqi society under Saddam Hussein, that the current government is focusing excessively on the majority Shi'a population. This is reinforced by a widespread belief that the Army and other security forces, dominated as they are by Shi'a and Kurdish personnel, are government vehicles for Shi'a dominance.

A further element is the belief that the Maliki government has been far too slow in incorporating Awakening Movement militias into the security forces and the wider civil service. Since the Sunni-based Awakening Movement was an important component in lessening the insurgency in 2007-08, the marginalisation of many of its members is an issue that exacerbates tensions, with some of them re-engaging with insurgency. Possibly the greatest test for the Maliki government in the course of the next six months is whether it can moderate the Sunni perception of Shi'a dominance.

What complicates this is that the Maliki government cannot afford to offer too much to the Sunni minority, partly because the relatively low oil prices of the past six months mean that government revenues are below planned levels. More pervading as a political factor is the belief among many Shi'as that since they were so marginalised during the period of the Saddam Hussein regime it is only right that they should benefit from the changed circumstances of Shi'a political control.

The other major long-term issue is whether US troops will actually withdraw from the country as a whole on the timetable that is supposed to have been agreed – the end of 2011. In spite of the withdrawal from the cities, the US is still maintaining around 130,000 troops in the country. This is down from the 168,000 peak at the time of the surge in 2007-08 but not far below the 150,000 figure that was typical

of the first four years of the war. The rate of planned withdrawal from the current level appears likely to be very modest, at least for the rest of this year. More generally, sources in the Pentagon suggest that there are plans to keep substantial forces in the country for many years to come.

There are numerous ways in which this circle can be squared, not least by re-categorising troops as trainers or support elements for Iraqi security forces, or guardians of US facilities. Some of their functions can also be contracted to private US security companies. Since the United States has recently completed construction of the world's largest embassy, in the green zone in Baghdad, and there are US diplomatic and development facilities elsewhere in the country, the security function can certainly be substantial.

Even so, the very fact that the urban withdrawal has been represented as an end to occupation means that a future Iraqi government may have great difficulty in allowing more than a few thousand US troops to remain. This is far less than the 35-50,000 frequently suggested in Washington as a long-term garrison and would represent a major change in the disposition of US forces in the oil- and gas-rich region around the Persian Gulf. It is an issue that could become particularly significant towards the end of the Obama administration's first term.

Iran

The validity of the Iranian Presidential Election result was widely questioned in the immediate aftermath of the poll, leading to substantial street demonstrations in Tehran and a number of provincial cities. By the end of the first ten days, the protests had been largely contained, often with the use of considerable force. At least 2,000 people were arrested and foreign countries, notably Britain, were accused of fomenting dissent. Furthermore, the government of Mr Ahmadinejad moved rapidly to strengthen its position in a process that clearly had the support of the Supreme Leader.

Even so, in the post-election environment the government has three major issues to address. One is the continuing problem of the economy, with relatively low oil prices making previous issues of economic mismanagement even more severe. The second is the extent of the opposition that has been demonstrated since the election. Even though the government was able to gain control, it has been left with a legacy of considerable dissent that must either be suppressed or co-opted. On the evidence so far, suppression seems more likely.

From the government's perspective the third issue is the most worrying, and that is the extent of the criticism of recent government actions coming from significant religious figures, especially in the religious centre of the city of Qom. While the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the most powerful figure in the country, he is not the most senior member of the clergy, his power coming from a combination of religious status with political power built on years of dedicated development of a close circle of associates. The regime has been successful in this consolidation of power but faces internal opposition, not least from Hashemi Rafsanjani. This alone is probably not enough to cause excessive concern, but if criticisms from senior religious figures in Qom were to increase, the regime would face serious difficulties of religious status. In such circumstances, co-option of opposition would be more likely, so the response from Qom in the coming months will do much to determine how the regime behaves.

Meanwhile, the re-election of Mr Ahmadinejad has undoubtedly caused concern in Israel, but it has also meant that Mr Netanyahu's government can insist that Israel's central security concern is Iran and its presumed nuclear weapons programme, and that this must take precedence over the issue of the Palestinian conflict in terms of US/Israeli relations. While the majority view in Israel is that the Obama administration will persist in seeking better relations with Iran, it is also believed that this will fail, leading to a potential crisis with Iran and the renewed possibility of Israeli military action. A more

cooperative Iran, willing to engage with the United States, would diminish this risk, making the role of clergy in Qom potentially significant in terms of foreign policy as well as internal politics.

Afghanistan

With large numbers of additional US troops being deployed in Afghanistan, the end of June saw the start of a major US military operation in Helmand Province, aimed at taking territory from Taliban militias. This was coordinated with a smaller but still substantial UK operation and followed a substantial operation by the Pakistani Army to take over areas of Taliban control in the Swat Valley, a part of North West Frontier Province. By the end of the month the Swat Valley operation had been under way for three weeks and there were indications that operations would also be mounted in districts of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), including North and South Waziristan. These are districts that have been far removed from government control and have served as havens for Taliban and al-Qaida paramilitaries operating on both sides of the border.

At the end of the month the Pakistani authorities claimed that the Swat Valley had been largely cleared of Taliban elements, but independent observers pointed to more than two million people who had fled the fighting. Many of these were in crowded refugee camps, often with aid being provided by radical religious groups in the absence of government assistance. As such, the camps had the potential to be recruiting grounds for Islamist paramilitaries.

Perhaps as significant as this was the indication that Pakistani Taliban militias in the Swat Valley have consistently melted away in the face of Pakistani Army forces rather than fight them under circumstances in which the Army's firepower would be hugely damaging. Furthermore, there have been very few reports of Taliban leaders of any note being killed or detained. Thus a perception of success by the Pakistani Army could be very short-lived, especially if Pakistan's civil authorities are unable to take control of the valley in a manner that would allow the early and safe return of the refugees. Previous experience suggests that Pakistan may not have this capability.

Across the border in Helmand Province, the early indications of the impact of the US and UK military operations were that Taliban paramilitaries rarely engaged the western forces, again melting away into those neighbourhoods in which they felt secure. Both US and British military operations are intended to lead on to the consolidation of positions in towns and larger villages, with a long-term security presence being maintained. This may be feasible in theory, but there are serious doubts as to whether the western forces have anything like sufficient troops to maintain numerous small garrisons. Indeed, one of the experiences as the major operation got under way was that Taliban paramilitaries were becoming increasingly adept at the use of roadside bombs. Furthermore, there were also incidents of Taliban attacks on isolated US positions in eastern Afghanistan, well away from Helmand. This indicated that there is a degree of organisation of Taliban operations that is both sophisticated and geographically wide-ranging.

Conclusion

The Obama administration has demonstrated a new commitment to engagement across the Middle East, not least with the highly significant Cairo speech ([see International Security Monthly Briefing, May 2009. The Obama Cairo Speech – Context and Implications](#)). At a general level this represents a significant change from the policies of the Bush administration. However, in all three countries – Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan – there are difficulties ahead. How the Obama administration is able to handle them will be a strong indication of its commitment. There may well be a willingness to maintain efforts at dialogue with Iran, while accepting that US influence in Iraq is going to have to diminish. It is perhaps Afghanistan, along with Pakistan, that will represent the greatest challenge for the administration.

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