

**International Security Monthly Briefing – August 2010**

**A COMPLEX WAR IN THE SHADOWS**

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This month's briefing looks at recent developments in Afghanistan and the United States' increasingly shadowy war against al-Qaida. It also examines the planned withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq and the debate about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan due to start in July 2011.

**Afghanistan**

The June briefing in this series (*Afghan Options*) pointed to problems that had arisen in Afghanistan since the start of Operation Moshtarak in central Helmand Province last February. That operation was conducted largely by US forces, with assistance from elements of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and coalition forces including British units. It was intended to demonstrate how a Taliban-dominated district could be cleared of insurgents, allowing central government administration to take effect. At the time, it promised to be an example of the kind of progress that could be achieved in Afghanistan, given the rapid increase in US troop deployments. (See March briefing, *A Hint of Victory?*) More significantly, it was intended to set the scene for a much larger operation that would take control of the city of Kandahar and the districts surrounding the city in central Kandahar Province, this being the most important focus of Taliban influence in the whole of Afghanistan.

In the event, Operation Moshtarak proved difficult to conclude and in the months that followed, there was abundant evidence that Taliban paramilitaries had melted away rather than fight openly against heavily armed and well-trained regular US forces, but that they then returned and began systematically to regain influence across the district. One effect of this was for the US military command to make clear that the Kandahar operation that was originally expected to commence in July, would be postponed until September and would then stretch over many months. There would be an emphasis on the use of ANA troops to provide security in the centre of the city and US troops would mainly be engaged in cordon and search operations with US Special Forces used repeatedly for house raids to kill or detain insurgents. It was not clear how well the ANA troops would function, given repeated problems during Operation Moshtarak, and there were concerns over the impact of house raids.

These issues were overshadowed at the end of June by the sacking of General Stanley McChrystal and his replacement by General David Petraeus. While Petraeus was a popular choice within the United States, given his policies in Iraq, the period through July and early August saw further difficulties emerging in Afghanistan. The United Nations office in Kabul reported a substantial increase in civilian deaths in the first six months of 2010, and coalition forces suffered more casualties, with over 430 killed by mid-August, compared with 521 for the whole of 2009. Furthermore, there was evidence that Taliban and other paramilitary groups were extending their influence across northern Afghanistan. General Petraeus remains insistent that US forces will ultimately prevail, enabling them to leave Afghanistan in the coming years in a state of stability, but there remains a singularly difficult issue to resolve.

Support for the war in the United States is slipping, and this has done much to convince the Obama administration that there must be evident progress before the 2012 Presidential Election campaign starts late next year. The political strategy has moved towards advocating the start of a withdrawal by July 2011, meaning that the current surge in US forces is very much a short-term phenomenon. The idea is that in less than a year's time, the US military superiority will be so effective that it will be possible to negotiate with weakened insurgents. While it is tacitly accepted that the eventual outcome will be some kind of Taliban participation in governance, this will be represented as no more than a minority influence

- a necessary aid to achieving stability. Furthermore, there is the expectation that US will maintain influence in the country for some years to come, not least through a continuing, if concentrated, presence at a small number of powerful military bases such as those at Bagram and Kandahar.

In press briefings in early August, General Petraeus made it clear in his view that the proposed timetable would be very much dependent on the rate of progress in curbing the level of the insurgency. While this is understandable from a military perspective, the reality on the ground is of an insurgency that is simply not proving amenable to control. It follows that there are likely to be major issues arising early next year as the deadline for starting the withdrawal approaches. It is just possible that operations in Kandahar City in the final five months of this year do succeed in demonstrating progress, but this does not currently seem likely. Furthermore, the coalition of forces in Afghanistan is already fraying, with Canadian and Dutch contingents nearing the end of their deployments. In overall terms, it is therefore likely that next year will see a conflict between an electoral necessity to begin a withdrawal and military need to maintain substantial US forces in the country.

## **Iraq**

The situation for the US military is also dependent on developments in Iraq. President Obama announced in early August that combat operations would, as planned, end by September, with the 50,000 troops remaining in the country being in non-combat roles. There are, in addition, tens of thousands of foreign personnel operating as security contractors, many of them from the United States, but there are serious doubts as to whether Iraqi security forces can maintain stability. Senior Iraqi Army officers have expressed the view that there will need to be a US military presence for many years to come, even if the stated aim of the Obama administration is to have a complete withdrawal by the end of 2011.

The levels of violence within Iraq do suggest that the country is far from secure. Government sources pointed to more than 500 civilians killed in disturbances during July, although Pentagon sources claim a lower figure. What is clear is that major incidents continue, not least in the form of suicide bombings. On 7 August 43 people were killed in a bomb explosion in a market in Basra, and in July, 45 security personnel were killed in an attack on a pay-check point at an army base in the Radqniya district near Baghdad. These were followed by a devastating attack on a military recruitment base in Baghdad on 17 August that killed 60 people and wounded 125. The overall pattern of violence shows no sign of diminishing and there are credible reports that paramilitary groups loosely associated with the al-Qaida movement are becoming more active. This comes at a time when Iraq is still without a government, there having been persistent political stagnation following the election of a hung parliament last March.

At first sight, it would appear dangerous for the US military to continue its withdrawal, but the reality is that the “withdrawal” is partly a matter of semantics. A large proportion of the 50,000 US troops remaining in the country have been defined as “advise and assist brigades” that are intended to support and train the Iraqi security forces. In practice, these are combat brigades that have simply been re-assigned to new roles while retaining their full combat capabilities. Furthermore, they are supported by helicopter and fixed-wing air power and there are further US forces across the border in Kuwait. It is also likely that there will be a broadly similar renaming of forces during the course of 2011 – US forces may well remain in Iraq, with some Pentagon sources suggesting a need for a long-term presence of around 30,000 troops, but they will be re-defined in some manner which suggests that they cannot be seen as in any way serving as an occupying force.

## **The al-Qaida Movement**

The re-emergence of al-Qaida-linked paramilitaries in Iraq has caused concern within the country and also in Washington, as has the growing power of groups in Somalia and Yemen which have their own links with the movement. Beyond this, though, one of the most significant incidents of recent months

happened right at the end of July, when a super-tanker was attacked while transiting the Strait of Hormuz. On 28 July, the Japanese M.Star (a Very Large Crude Carrier - VLCC) was en route from an oil terminal in the United Arab Emirates to the Chiba refinery in Japan, loaded with 2.3 million barrels of oil. An explosion occurred that was later shown to be caused by a home-made bomb launched from a small boat. The M.Star is a double-hulled VLCC and survived the attack with damage that could be repaired in a few days at the UAE port of Fujairah, but the significance of the attack was considerable, since it was claimed by an al-Qaida-linked group, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, that had previously operated mainly in Egypt. There have been other incidents of economic targeting in recent years, including the bombing of the Limburg tanker off the coast of Yemen in 2002 and the attack on the Saudi oil processing plant at Abqaiq in 2006. While the M.Star attack failed, it is an indication of the ability of paramilitary movements to operate in new areas, the location of the attack being close to Oman and the UAE rather than Yemen or Saudi Arabia.

Although al-Qaida has survived a number of reversals in western Pakistan, especially attacks by armed drones, it remains an active movement, existing in the form of many diverse groups operating in south-west Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. This has led to the US military and some US security agencies operating in a similarly dispersed and low-key manner, the overall effect being a series of operations in several countries that commonly involve CIA paramilitary units, Special Forces operations and armed drone attacks but are rarely reported. They range over Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, they link to operations by French and other military organisations in North Africa and may even extend to intelligence-gathering in Tajikistan.

Such operations are far from new, and are not dissimilar to activities undertaken during the Cold War, but what is significant is that, while the current operations were developed in the context of the “war on terror” during the George W Bush administration, their use has been greatly expanded under Barack Obama. As the New York Times and a few other US sources have pointed out, there is a degree of cross-party support for these actions – Democrats are concerned at the domestic impact of high-visibility warfare in Afghanistan and Republicans are reluctant to criticise a policy that appears to be having an impact.

At the same time, there are major concerns over the evolution of this “war in the shadows”. In one recent incident in Yemen, a US air strike that was intended to kill an al-Qaida-linked group actually killed the Deputy Governor of Marib Province who had been engaged in talks with local paramilitaries aimed at persuading them to give up their actions. There have been other incidents in which civilians were killed. More generally, there is concern over the level of congressional oversight of such operations and a risk that the dividing line between espionage and regular military operations is being blurred, a tendency that could mean military personnel losing protection afforded by the Geneva Conventions.

More generally, the much greater long-term issue is that this kind of operation, however successful it may seem to be, can all too readily be represented by opponents as a further form of occupation by a distant superpower. The availability of numerous high-capacity forms of data transmission, from the smart phone through to the laptop and the web, all mean that it is easy for paramilitary propagandists to report rapidly on the impact of individual clandestine military operations. Propagandists associated with the al-Qaida movement have been quick to do this and, in the process, they are developing a narrative of a world-wide assault by the United States on Islam. In the short term, the war of the shadows may seem attractive to an administration facing multiple problems. In the long term it may simply add to those problems.

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