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**INSECURITY AND POLICY CHOICES**

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The international security agenda in 2011 will continue to be dominated by four countries across the Middle East and South Asia – Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. While there is some chance of progress, there are also already indications, from the trends in 2010, of potential major crises that collectively require major changes in direction by the international community.

**Iraq**

Eight months after the March elections, a political stalemate remains, as persistent efforts to form a new government fail through internal dissension. Nouri al-Maliki has continued his attempts to form a coalition government drawing almost entirely on the Shi'a-orientated political groupings. Many analysts believe that any government that does not include Iyad Alawi's more secular al-Iraqiyya Alliance, which also has significant support from Sunni communities, will be incapable of healing the deep divisions that exist in the country. While levels of violence through 2010 have been much lower than in the period from 2003 to 2009, major incidents persist, many of them involving bomb attacks aimed at Shi'a communities, the police or government departments. One, on 12 December, targeted a police checkpoint in the city of Ramadi, killing eight people including six police officers, and injuring many more.

The long-term problem in Iraq goes beyond the immediate confessional divisions and is rooted in the impact of a bitter seven-year war. That has cost the lives of at least 120,000 people, with hundreds of thousands more injured – many of them maimed for life. About four million people have been displaced, half internally and half to neighbouring countries. Some have returned home but recent violence has slowed that process substantially. During the seven years, over 120,000 people were detained without trial, many of them in appalling conditions and some of them for years. The end result of all of this is a degree of bitterness and anger that will take many years to heal. The experience of other protracted conflicts suggests that at least a generational period of around 25 years is required, but this is in circumstances of political stability, which remains limited in present-day Iraq.

Under the Obama administration, the position of the US forces in Iraq has changed somewhat, but not as much as has been suggested, with the United States actually retaining considerable influence. The target of achieving a reduction in US forces from around 150,000 to 50,000 by late Summer was achieved, and troops are now meant to avoid combat roles and to be involved mainly in securing US interests and in training Iraqi security forces, offering them combat assistance only in rare circumstances. The stated longer-term aim is withdrawal of all forces by the end of 2011, but there are three elements that inject a degree of uncertainty.

One is the persistent reports that US Special Forces are regularly involved in security operations, but because they are not classed as regular combat troops, a fiction is maintained of minimal US involvement in combat. The second is a series of reports that Washington is anticipating an agreement with Iraqi politicians to keep around 15,000 troops in the country after the end of 2011. Finally, the sheer size of the US diplomatic presence, with a massive embassy complex in Baghdad and large missions in other cities, means that there will be a substantial US-controlled private security contingent in the country for years to come, in addition to troops that may remain.

The United States government regards Iraq as a country of great importance to its interests in the Gulf region, partly because of the oil and gas reserves of the entire region and partly because of Iraq's own large oil reserves, but most importantly as a counter to the influence of Iran. Given that it is the Tehran

administration that has gained most from the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime, and has worked hard to increase its influence in Iraq, a US government of any complexion is unlikely to let its security presence in Iraq diminish to the extent that is currently suggested. The United States will therefore be engaged substantially in Iraq for decades rather than years.

### **Iran and Israel**

Earlier reports from Oxford Research Group (cross-ref to July Iran report) have pointed to the tensions between Israel and Iran over the latter's presumed ambitions to develop nuclear weapons, and the Israeli perception of this as an entirely unacceptable and potentially existential threat to the state. The Israeli government persists in this view, but there have been clear signs that the Obama administration would be greatly concerned over the regional destabilising impact of an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear and missile facilities. Negotiations continue with Iran, with much of the impetus coming from European Union states, and there are indications that Iran is experiencing such severe economic problems, caused partly by sanctions, that some compromise might be possible.

Based on the experience of past negotiations, however, prospects are not good, and the US mid-session elections have increased Republican Party representation in Congress, and with it the political support for Israel, even extending to some calls for direct US military action against Iran. One impact of this is to make it easier for the current Israeli government to envisage a military strike on Iran because of the political support it will receive in Congress, and also because it would be an operation likely to be aided by indirect assistance from some western Gulf Arab states.

At the same time, and thoroughly unexpectedly, a major catastrophe within Israel has raised quite different issues. This is the experience of the recent forest fires in the Carmel mountains region near Haifa in northern Israel that killed over 40 people and seriously overstretched Israel's fire-fighting capacity. Several countries came to Israel's aid and commentators within Israel pointed to the significance of the fires, demonstrating the country's vulnerability in time of war. If the Israeli authorities could not handle a substantial but far from nation-wide civil emergency, how could they respond to numerous missile strikes that might ensue, particularly from Hezbollah in southern Lebanon? There has to be an assumption that Hezbollah military planners have recognised the civil defence vulnerability shown by the fires and will be working towards refashioning many of their missiles with incendiary rather than the current high explosive warheads.

At the same time, there is little evidence that Hezbollah has any interest in engaging in conflict with Israel, even in the event of an Israeli attack on Iran. Where the Carmel fire experience is significant, is in pointing to a further and unexpected vulnerability, but this does not necessarily mean that Israel will be more cautious in its attitude to Iran. Indeed, it may even lead to a stronger view among some military planners that Israel has to recognise its failure to seriously damage Hezbollah in 2006, that Hezbollah is a growing security threat and that any action against Iran must involve a parallel and very large-scale operation against Hezbollah. Put bluntly, there are significant political and military elements within Israel that believe that the state has no option but to engage militarily with Iran and Hezbollah. As such, the risk of war remains high.

### **Afghanistan and Pakistan**

There have been two major developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan that have substantial implications for developments over the next year, and these seem in conflict with the policies of the Obama administration. In contrast to the Bush administration, the Obama approach has been to surge troops into Afghanistan while seeking to negotiate a settlement with Taliban and other armed groups from a position of military strength, rather than going for outright military victory. The assumption has been that this would allow a progressive military withdrawal, albeit with Taliban and other groups gaining

a serious stake in the long-term governance of the country. The implication here is that military and political processes would work hand-in-hand, with a degree of balance between the two.

The experience of the past three months has suggested very strongly that the military element, under the leadership of General David Petraeus, has been getting the great majority of the emphasis. With President Obama having relieved two previous commanding officers in Afghanistan, General Petraeus is in a position that is close to invulnerable, and in these circumstances there is abundant evidence that US forces under his overall leadership are intensifying military operations on both sides of the border.

In Afghanistan, there has been a substantial increase in Special Forces operations, usually known as “night raids”, where suspected Taliban paramilitaries are either detained or killed, often with civilians suffering deaths and injuries. While these operations may well be having an impact, military raids on households are deeply offensive to Afghan communities and appear to be leading to considerable anger and increased opposition to the US presence. A second tactic, which is being used increasingly, is the destroying of houses and farm buildings when Taliban elements have been forced out of a particular district, in order to prevent them using the buildings if they return when US troops have vacated an area. In at least one case, a village of around 40 houses was destroyed. In these operations, inhabitants may be evacuated and compensation offered, but the effect of destroying habitats remains deeply unpopular.

Finally, there is abundant evidence of increasing US military involvement in Pakistan. In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), especially North Waziristan, the use of armed drone attacks has increased rapidly. Much of this activity is undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency, but CIA activities are being paralleled by US Special Forces operating within Pakistan, the activities extending beyond training Pakistani forces to active engagement in combat operations.

The overall effect of the increased military activity on both sides of the border is difficult to predict, but the indications are that it is leading to greater opposition to what is widely seen as foreign military occupation rather than a diminishing of the capabilities of the Taliban and other armed opposition groups. Nevertheless, this is the policy that is being pursued, with the impetus coming more from regional US military commanders, especially General Petraeus, than from the White House.

### Prospects

Concerning Iraq, Israel/Iran and Afghanistan/Pakistan there are indications of major problems in 2011. Iraq may experience continued political stalemate and substantial violence rather than starting the transition to reconciliation and peaceful stability. A war involving Israel, Iran and Hezbollah would have far-reaching consequences. If opposition to enhanced military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to grow, then prospects for a slow transition to political compromise in Afghanistan are diminished.

In these circumstances, aiding the establishment of a broadly representative government in Iraq should be central to US policy there, and every effort should be made to avoid an Israel/Iran conflict. As to Afghanistan and Pakistan, if the Obama administration continues its current policies, following the December policy review, it is going to have to recognise that, like so many actions by the United States since 9/11, seeking military superiority over the Taliban may prove to be deeply counterproductive, both to the region and to its own wider security needs.

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