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AFTER IRAQ

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Introduction

The US military withdrawal from Iraq has accelerated and almost all the troops will have left the country by the end of next month. This follows the breakdown in talks between the US and Iraq in October on a continuing military presence. It contrasts hugely with expectations of a substantial long-term military presence as recently as a few months ago. Leaving behind a troubled country, the withdrawal raises questions over its reasons and the future of the US security posture in the region. Above all, it has implications for Iranian influence in the Middle East which, in turn, raises concerns in a number of countries, most notably Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Expectations and Outcomes

This series of briefings started in May 2003 in the immediate wake of the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime and at a time of positive expectations on the part of the Bush administration. The war had started in late March of that year and US troops moved rapidly to occupy Baghdad within three weeks. President Bush made his “mission accomplished” speech on the flight deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on 1 May, expressing some caution over the levels of stability, yet confident that the war was over. With Saddam Hussein gone and Afghanistan rid of the Taliban, the future looked bright after the catastrophe of the 9/11 atrocities. Furthermore, much of the optimism stemmed from the belief that the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime, the establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under Pentagon control, and the building of several large US bases would all constrain Iran.

Although there was a widespread belief, especially in the United States, that the war had been a great success, some independent analysts saw it differently. The first of the briefings from Oxford Research Group, in May 2003 - *Mission Accomplished?* - expressed this caution in its conclusion:

Perhaps what is most surprising about the immediate post-war period has been the extent of the immediate opposition to US forces within Iraq. There seems to have been little expectation of this neither in Washington nor London, but it is likely to create substantial obstacles to any attempt to ensure that an ‘acceptable’ regime gains power in Baghdad. Given this early opposition, any regime in Baghdad that is not broadly acceptable across Iraq is likely to have to maintain power forcefully, with that position being backed up by the availability of US military power. This is not a recipe for a stable and peaceful post-war Iraq.

In the event, violent opposition was so extensive that a full-scale urban insurgency developed and it was more than a year before the CPA handed over some powers to an Iraqi administration. Military planners had anticipated a rapid scaling down of foreign troops to 70,000 by September 2003, eventually leaving perhaps 20,000 troops concentrated in three or four bases, rather than a widely distributed occupying force. This was not what happened, and most of the 160,000 troop numbers in the country in June, together with 40,000 more in neighbouring Kuwait, would be maintained there for years to come.

As the next briefing in the series confirmed (*Losing the Peace*, June 2003):

(...) The US troops are being viewed much more as occupiers than liberators. However much the demise of Saddam Hussein has been welcomed, the reaction to what is perceived of as a foreign occupation has been a severe surprise to the US and British military and civil administrators.

There followed a protracted and complex series of conflicts, with the foreign presence peaking at over 180,000 in late 2007. While the conflicts decreased over the period 2007-10, the past year has seen a reversal of this trend, with over 300 people a month being killed in violent incidents and a near-daily litany of bombings. Nevertheless, the US troop withdrawals continue with a decrease from 110,000 at the start of the year to 39,000 in mid-October and down to just 20,000 in late November. By early next year, the uniformed US troop presence will be limited to 200 Marines guarding diplomatic and other facilities and a small number in training roles.

There will, though, be a much more substantial US civilian presence, including several thousand private security contractors. The US Embassy in Baghdad is reported to be the largest in the world and there are two substantial diplomatic missions in other parts of Iraq together with many developmental and commercial facilities. In all, there will be around 16,000 diplomats and civilian contractors present in the country but, apart from the diplomats, US personnel will not enjoy immunity from prosecution through the Iraqi legal system, an issue that proved to be a major stumbling block in the US/Iraqi negotiations on the future US military presence.

Why the Withdrawal?

There are two aspects to the unexpected changes in the US relationship with Iraq in the past six months. One is the reason for the withdrawal and the other is the national and regional implications. Regarding the former, it relates to the outcome of what was expected to be an easy process of regime change but turned into something very different, coupled with changed domestic opinion in the United States. For the US military, the war turned out to be very costly indeed, with some 4,500 troops killed and over 30,000 wounded, many of the latter maimed for life. Between 2003 and 2008, the war became steadily more unpopular within the United States, so much so that Barack Obama was to characterise it as a “bad war” during the 2008 Presidential Election campaign, making its ending a major plank of his bid for the White House. This was in contrast to the Afghan conflict which, was seen as a “good war”, largely because it could more easily be connected to the original 9/11 attacks.

Once in office, President Obama initiated reviews of the Iraq and Afghan conflicts and determined on a steady drawdown of troop levels in the former, while eventually accepting the idea of a surge in forces in Afghanistan. The Afghan surge was intended not to ensure the defeat of the Taliban but to negotiate a successful disengagement from a position of strength. It is not at all clear that this will succeed, but this has not affected the withdrawal from Iraq.

What appears to have been anticipated by the Obama administration was a decrease in US troop levels in Iraq down to perhaps 20,000 troops – far less than at the peak but still a sizeable force that would be able to support the Iraqi civil government, while serving as a deterrent to Iran. What was not anticipated was an Iraqi insistence that US troops staying on in the country would be answerable for their actions to Iraqi law. Iraqi national feelings, coupled

with encouragement from Tehran, appear to have been responsible for this approach, which was entirely unacceptable to the United States, leading to an impasse in the negotiations in October 2011, and resulting in the decision to go for a full-scale withdrawal.

Since that decision was taken, the Pentagon has responded by seeking other ways of maintaining a substantial presence in the region:

- Increasing the combat forces based in neighbouring Kuwait to be able to respond to serious insecurity in Iraq, especially any crisis involving threats to US government and commercial personnel.
- Expanding the naval presence in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.
- Increasing military links with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates).

Excluding Iraq, the United States maintains some 40,000 troops in the region, but most are concentrated in Kuwait and serve as logistical support for operations in Iraq. It is likely that Kuwait will now become the location for a full combat brigade, the core brigade being 4-5,000 troops but with some thousands more in support. As to the regional naval presence this might include the more frequent deployment of more than one carrier battle group. Concerning the GCC, the United States already has extensive bilateral relations with member states but will seek to integrate these into joint operations. In addition to this, the US military is aiming to ensure that Iraqi security forces are progressively integrated into the security architecture of the region, a starting point being Iraqi Army involvement in next year's *Eager Lion 12* counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism exercises in Jordan.

Iran and the Region after the Iraq War

By all these means the United States will seek to maintain considerable influence in the region, which contains over 60% of the world's oil reserves and close to 30% of natural gas reserves. Even so, this is a far more limited presence than was anticipated eight years ago when the Saddam Hussein regime was terminated and represents a considerable set-back for US foreign policy, especially in relation to its aim of constraining Iran. This is not to say that Iranian regional power has benefitted greatly but there have been some significant developments.

The most important of these is the Iranian influence with the Maliki government in Baghdad. This has been evident since the government was elected but has got more noticeable in recent months, not least through influencing the Iraqi insistence on rejecting the US negotiating position that its forces should continue to have immunity under Iraqi law. At the same time, Iraqi political culture, especially within the Shi'a-orientated political parties, does not see itself as the junior partner to Tehran and is more than capable of exercising a degree of independence. The Iranian government has other problems including the doubts over the continuing survival of its ally, the Assad regime in Syria. Domestically, Iran faces internal economic problems and, in particular, a democratic "youth bulge" of millions of young people wanting modernity and frequently finding the power and actions of the clergy and government to be stultifying.

Even so, the outcome in Iraq, with the imminent US departure, transcends these issues and undoubtedly gives the leadership in Tehran a substantially increased sense of regional influence. This has two other consequences. One is that Iran's increasing influence is of great concern to the Saudi authorities, especially as they face some unrest from their own Shi'a

minority, as well as dissent in neighbouring Bahrain. At the very least, this will mean that Saudi Arabia will embark on another substantial round of arms purchases, with the main emphasis being on missile defences and other weapons relevant to countering a more assertive Iran, this setting in train a regional arms race as Iran responds.

The other consequence is manifestly increased concern in Israel at the rise of Iran and the failure of the United States to limit that rise because of its failed operations in Iraq. Saddam Hussein has gone, but Iran, far from being constrained, has been boosted in its regional power. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of all the consequences of the war in Iraq – the United States is by far the most important ally of Israel, to the extent that Israel can traditionally be called a client state, yet from an Israeli perspective it's guardian has been found wanting. This is an added reason for Israel to consider taking unilateral action and to do so soon. The very failure of the US endeavour in Iraq might therefore end up being a powerful inducement towards yet another war.

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