

International Security Monthly Briefing

June 2003

‘Losing the Peace’

Professor Paul Rogers

During the build-up to the war with Iraq, substantial military forces were put into the region, primarily by the United States. Most of these went into Kuwait, but there were additional forces deployed in Oman, Qatar, the Emirates and also Jordan. These deployments were in addition to the earlier establishment of a US military presence in Pakistan, Afghanistan and several Central Asian republics including Uzbekistan. Overall, this gave an impression of a US build-up in the Middle East and Central Asia that had parallels, at least in terms of scale, with the American presence in Europe during the Cold War era.

In one sense this was misleading, in that it came at a time when the civilian leadership at the Pentagon was looking to decrease the size of the US armed forces, especially the army. The strategy being developed was shaped around the idea that most aspects of US security policy could be implemented using rapid deployment forces, not least strike aircraft and missiles operated by the US Air Force and Navy.

It was recognised that there was a need for a substantial network of bases in countries of security concern, especially those located in the oil-rich regions of Central and South West Asia, but the belief was that such military facilities could largely be maintained on a stand-by basis, and that airpower would be dominant, albeit backed up by ground forces when necessary.

As part of this thinking, there was a strong belief that the substantial ground forces to be used in Iraq, and the much smaller forces used in the Afghan War over a year earlier, could be largely returned to the United States, to be replaced by relatively small garrisons or even moth-balled facilities.

This preference for avoiding a large military presence at numerous overseas bases does not mean any decrease in interest in maintaining the security of overseas interests. Instead, it is based on the belief that this is best done by non-traditional methods. Moreover, the thinking is that there are very powerful economic and political inducements for limiting the size of the actual deployments.

These stem partly from grounds of cost, but also from a recognition that a very overt presence can provide a powerful focus for local dissent, extending to considerable political violence as experienced in recent years. This is certainly the strongest motive for the announcement last month of the withdrawal of most US troops from Saudi Arabia.

How does this strategy measure up to what is actually happening, nearly eighteen months after the war in Afghanistan and two months after the end of the war in Iraq? The short answer is that the experience in Afghanistan and Iraq suggests that the strategy underpinning the evolving US security posture may already be failing. This, in turn, could have considerable implications for future American military action.

In Afghanistan, much of the country away from Kabul remains in disarray, with a combination of rampant warlordism, banditry and the resurgence of some Taliban militia severely limiting nation-wide post-conflict peace-building. For the United States, the situation is made more problematic by the environment that has developed in north-west Pakistan, where the recently elected Islamist provincial government is far from sympathetic to US interests.

In Afghanistan itself, the United States is having to maintain a force of over 10,000 troops and is continuing to use strategic bombers such as the B-1B to engage in substantial air raids against Taliban units, along with regular deployments of troops. Efforts to train an Afghan National Army are proving very

OXFORD · RESEARCH · GROUP

difficult and there is an acceptance that a substantial US military presence will be maintained in the countries for some years.

Although the Iraq War is more recent, it is already clear that the US troops are being viewed much more as occupiers than liberators. However much the demise of the Saddam Hussein has been welcomed, the reaction to what is perceived of as foreign occupation has been a severe surprise to the US and British military and civil administrators.

Earlier planning assumed that military forces could be scaled down to 70,000 by September, or even much less than this. While it was apparent that there would be a permanent military presence at three or four bases, these would probably not involve more than 20,000 personnel and would be distinct from the forces of occupation that would be largely withdrawn in the coming months.

As of the beginning of June, the picture was very different, with about 160,000 US and British troops in Iraq itself, supported by another 40,000 in Kuwait and neighbouring countries. Moreover, moves were even underway to reinforce the military presence – instead of some units being replaced by incoming troops, the former would stay on and the latter would supplement them. It is now probable that forces will be maintained at the present level for many months.

In parallel with this, the development of an independent Iraqi political life has proved hugely problematic. In Basra, the British have summarily sacked the City Council that they established immediately after the war, much to the anger of local Iraqi professionals, and the initial US plans for a country-wide assembly in July to advise on some kind of national council has been cancelled. It is being replaced by a small advisory group appointed directly by the occupying authorities, again in the face of substantial disagreement and opposition.

Meanwhile, the control of the key Iraqi industries of oil and agriculture are firmly in the hands of US appointees, with the senior oil man, Phillip Carroll, suggesting that Iraq may even withdraw from OPEC - going its own way and thereby weakening the position of other oil producers such as Iran, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia.

All this is against a background of continuing disorder in Iraq itself, stemming in part from criminality, the widespread availability of light weapons, the failure to reconstitute public services and rampant unemployment made worse by the recent US decision to disband the Iraqi armed forces and send up to 400,000 young men home. Attacks against US troops continue on a regular basis, with the inevitable result that they see their main role as protecting themselves rather than promoting public order.

The predicament in Iraq is compounded by three further trends. The first is that Washington is evidently not prepared to allow the UN or any other body a major role in the stabilisation of Iraq and its transition to a functioning independent democracy. By insisting on its own continuing control of the country, the United States makes it more likely than ever that a bitter anti-American mood will remain in place in most parts of Iraq outside of the Kurdish north. This is fuelled by a widespread view that the very purpose of the termination of the regime had much more to do with the control of Iraq's oil than with weapons of mass destruction or relief from the regime's brutality.

The second is that last month's substantial paramilitary attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca suggest that al-Qaida and its affiliates are still very active and that the occupation of Iraq has contributed very little to the US "war on terror".

The final trend is the extraordinary rise in anti-Americanism across much of the world, shown by the 4 June report from the independent Pew Research Centre as part of its Global Attitudes Project. One key aspect of the new report, conducted in many countries, was the percentage of respondents who had an unfavourable opinion of the United States. Comparing last month with last summer, the percentage had risen from 75 to 99 in Jordan, 59 to 71 in Lebanon and 69 to 81 in Pakistan. Turkey saw a remarkable change, from 55 to 83%, and in Indonesia it was even more pronounced, from 36 to 83%.

OXFORD · RESEARCH · GROUP

Perhaps most striking was the polling evidence of support for Osama bin Laden in many countries. According to the *International Herald Tribune* (4 June), the al-Qaida leader,

“who is blamed for the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States that killed 3,000 people, was chosen as one of the three men most trusted to do the right thing in world affairs by the people of Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and the Palestinian Authority.”

One remarkable aspect of current situation is the difference in view across the Atlantic. Much of the analysis described above, including the results of the Pew Centre's work, would be accepted with little dissent in many countries in Europe, and even, to a fair extent, in Britain. Indeed the very predicament that the British government has found itself in over weapons of mass destruction is an indicator of a continuing unease about the Iraq War.

In the United States, on the other hand, there is relatively little concern or understanding about America's wider predicament, and the administration remains insistent that occupying Iraq was right, that the war on terror is being won, and that endemic anti-Americanism is little more than the price to be paid for creating the New American Century.

In such circumstances, any attempt to bring together these radically divergent views is of singular importance. In particular, the role of European and North American non-governmental organisations could be of real value in helping to prevent the global divisions becoming even more fractured than they are now.