

International Security Monthly Briefing

August 2003

'Uneasy Victory?'

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At the end of April, there was a near-universal belief in Washington that the war in Iraq was over and that a substantial victory had also been won in the wider "war on terror". There were some concerns over post-war opposition to the US military presence, but these hardly detracted from a perception of easy victory. On 1 May, George W. Bush landed on the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* and made his much-publicised speech declaring that major hostilities were over.

There was some concern in Washington that there had been no immediate discoveries of chemical or biological weapons in Iraq, in spite of a series of robust and immediate searches of key sites. The concern with this issue had been rather more substantial in Britain, where opposition to the war had been markedly greater and a number of Labour back-bench MPs had somewhat reluctantly backed the government on the basis of an immediate threat from the regime.

Even so, in the euphoria in Washington and the relief in London over the brevity of the war, it was perhaps forgotten that there had been intense international opposition to the war in the first place, culminating in many millions of people demonstrating in numerous capital cities and elsewhere across the world in mid-February. Although opposition to the war at the time was muted in the United States, and many people in Britain were prepared to suspend judgment and support the troops once the war started, both were temporary phenomena and were paralleled by enduring opposition in other countries throughout the war itself.

Missing Weapons and an Aftermath of Violence

Some four months after the fall of Baghdad, evidence of any major programme of weapons of mass destruction has proved elusive. It is quite possible that some details of past programmes and potential capabilities will be uncovered, but it is highly unlikely that any substantive evidence of anything that could amount to an immediate threat from the regime justifying war will emerge.

This represents something of a problem for the Bush administration and a substantially greater difficulty for Tony Blair, where the government remains embroiled in controversy over the motives for war. Away from Britain and the United States the wider international mood is one in which the original reasons for opposition to the war are now being confirmed. Moreover, the predicament that the United States now finds itself in as it occupies the country seems to many to reinforce the need to question the original motives.

It is worth, for a moment, just remembering the preconceptions of post-war Iraq with the reality. Towards the end of last year, there were frequent claims in London, supported to an extent in Washington, that a war was not inevitable, but these contrasted with reliable reports that many sectors of the Bush administration were working intensely on plans for post-war Iraq. Such planning was based on the assumption that war would happen and that Iraq would rapidly develop as a pro-western state under US tutelage.

Post-War Iraq – Myth and Reality

The point about mentioning this now is that there was actually extensive planning for post-war Iraq by many different government agencies, whereas the US administration is now being criticised for not thinking things through. The reality is that they did do just that, but got it grievously wrong by not anticipating opposition to their post-war control of the country.

One result of this is that, since the end of the first phase of the war, the opposition that has since been faced in Iraq has been persistently described as "remnants" of the old regime or criminal elements, as though it was something that would rapidly die away. This contrasts with what is happening on the ground in two respects – the extent of the problem and the forcefulness of the US military reaction.

On the first issue, US troops have had nearly 60 troops killed in combat since May, and many more killed in firearms accidents or road crashes. Both of these stem partly from the security problems, with "friendly fire" incidents continuing, and convoys being driven riskily at high speed to minimise the effects of ambushes. Even more significant is the incidence of serious injuries, with close to a thousand US troops being affected, many of them being taken back to the United States for treatment and eventual rehabilitation.

The response of US troops has been harsh, with thousands of Iraqis taken into custody and many hundreds killed in a series of vigorous operations in towns and cities across much of central Iraq. Even the US military leadership is now acknowledging that an effect of such activities is to increase opposition to the American presence, and there are now efforts being made to be more selective. This itself presents problems as it is only likely to be effective if combined with a high level of routine patrols and roadblocks, precisely the circumstances that make attacks on US troops more easy to undertake.

Moreover, the extent of the insurgency problem in Iraq is coinciding with further difficulties in Afghanistan, where there are major problems of insecurity stemming from opposition to the western presence and rampant warlordism. In the wider sphere, paramilitary actions continue. Following the bombings in Riyadh and Casablanca, the US-owned Marriott Hotel in the embassy district of Djakarta was bombed with substantial loss of life, and the US and British authorities have persistently issued warnings of further actions from al-Qaida.

Iraq and the "War on Terror"

One effect of these more global risks is for the United States authorities to relate these to what is happening in Iraq, just as they formerly sought to link the termination of the regime with the wider war on terror, a linkage that lacked credibility with informed analysts. On a number of occasions in recent weeks, the US civil and military leadership has diverted from its previous talk of opposition from "remnants" to raise the issue of foreign paramilitaries entering the country, thus making it easier to frame the difficulties in Iraq within the wider "war on terror".

One important effect of this is to make it more acceptable to sustain the deaths and injuries of US troops – the situation in Iraq is not just a guerrilla war but part of a much wider issue that can even be related to the 9/11 attacks two years ago.

What is the reality of this? Most of the actions in Iraq have been against US troops, with something like a thousand incidents in the past three months, but some have been against Iraqis considered to be collaborating with the occupiers. The recent bombing of the Jordanian diplomatic compound was different and could possibly be an indication of an external paramilitary involvement, not least because its indiscriminate effect has not been representative of recent attacks. At the same time, this is just one incident among many, and cannot be considered proof of external involvement.

We have to remember that the Saddam Hussein regime maintained very few links with external paramilitary organizations, and that the secular nature of the regime was actually anathema to groups such as al-Qaida. This does not mean, though, that post-war Iraq will not be a theatre for future paramilitary operations, and one of the original arguments made by some commentators opposed to the war was that it would enhance recruitment into al-Qaida and its affiliates.

According to this view, the United States would terminate the regime and would then occupy Iraq on a substantial scale for several months while an acceptable civil administration was established leading to a client regime in Baghdad. On this basis, US troops might well have been halved in numbers by September, though there would have been the establishment of several permanent bases.

Within a year or eighteen months the client government, fully acceptable to Washington, would have been firmly in place and the US presence would have then been limited to, at most, 12,000 personnel in perhaps four bases in the north, west, centre and south of the country.

The overall effect would be that the United States would have a powerful military presence in the heart of the Middle East and it would indirectly control the government of a country with the world's second largest oil reserves. Furthermore, it would be in an excellent position to put heavy pressure on Iran and Syria while greatly enhancing the security of its other client state in the region, Israel.

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Such an analysis is almost certainly in tune with what was actually planned in Washington, but the difference lay in that some independent commentators believed that such an outcome would be directly counterproductive to US interests. In this view, the establishment of a client regime in Baghdad in combination with a permanent US military presence in Iraq would be a "gift" to al-Qaida and affiliated groups. The only caveat would be that violent paramilitary opposition to such an outcome might take many months or even years to develop. This analysis was considered excessively pessimistic in London and Washington and was casually dismissed, but the actual situation is far worse.

The American Predicament

What we now have is a US military presence in Iraq numbering around 140,000, clearly seen as an occupying power. There is little prospect of decreasing the numbers, and countries such as India are deeply reluctant to become engaged without a clear UN authority which itself would be opposed by Washington. Meanwhile, the American forces are facing a dangerous guerrilla campaign that may only be affecting parts of Iraq but shows no sign of decline after nearly four months and is now extending to the use of devastating car bombs against "soft" targets.

The bottom line is that the United States is seen across the region as having taken over and occupying one of the major states of the Arab world. However much the previous regime was disliked and even hated, the result for much of Arab opinion is even worse – foreign occupation by an already unpopular superpower.

As a result, we should now expect a more pervasive process of anti-American paramilitary actions to develop, with non-Iraqi militia operating within the country in concert with Iraqi opposition groups. The attack on the Jordanian compound may have been an early indication of this. In a real sense, a potentially disastrous effect of the Iraq War has been the locating of large numbers of US troops in the heart of the Arab world, not in secure bases but out on patrol as they try to control an insurgency. In terms of the "war on terror", though, the real significance may turn out to be that groups such as al-Qaida no longer have to think in terms of going to America - America has come to them.