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‘Afghanistan, Iraq and the War on Terror’

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Based on earlier expectations, the developing insurgency in Iraq should have reached its peak by now and should be in decline. It was anticipated, for example, that the killing or capture of most of the old Ba’athist leadership, especially the deaths of Saddam Hussein’s two sons, Qusay and Uday, would have greatly damaged any sense of direction that the insurgency had developed. It was also believed that the combination of the excessive summer heat with heavily disrupted power supplies was a source of real frustration, and the coming of autumn combined with improved power supplies would ease tensions.

Finally, it was expected that some progress in economic reconstruction and development, coupled with the re-opening of schools, improvements in medical facilities and the reconstitution of a range of public services would all limit opposition to the coalition presence.

None of these expectations has been realised and, instead, the guerrilla actions continue to develop, with November being the worst month for US forces since the war began last March. Indeed, as we enter the ninth month of the war, there is growing evidence of a deep-seated insurgency that may even be extending its geographical spread towards the north of Iraq.

The US response, as detailed in last month’s note, is concentrating in part on trying to develop Iraqi security forces to take over many of the duties that are either being attempted by US troops or have lapsed since the start of the war. In addition, though, US troops have embarked on a much more vigorous counter-insurgency stance, including the use of strike aircraft, helicopter gun-ships, short-range ballistic missiles and anti-personnel cluster munitions.

It is a policy that is repeating one that was first tried earlier in the summer at the onset of the insurgency. Then, it lasted a few weeks, but was abandoned as counterproductive as the strong military actions increased antagonism to the US presence. It is probable that the same thing will happen this time, but it is also the case that the insurgents are evolving their methods of attack as well.

In the past four months, attacks on US forces have increased substantially, although there was a decline towards the end of November in the wake of the new US policy. In parallel with these, though, was a developing strategy of systematic attacks on three other groups of people. The first was an attempt to undermine wider international support for the coalition, including the bombing of the Jordanian and UN missions in Baghdad followed more recently by attacks on Italian, Polish, Danish, Spanish, Japanese, South Korean and other troops, diplomats or contractors.

Secondly there has been a succession of attacks on major coalition facilities including mortars used against former presidential compounds and rocket attacks on hotels. Finally, there has been a substantial campaign directed against Iraqi forces and people deemed to be collaborating with the United States. This has included some devastating bomb attacks against police stations as well as the assassination of judges, politicians, public service managers and journalists.

The actions against the police forces in a number of towns and cities seem designed to damage the US policy of handing over to Iraqi security forces and, if so, are likely to continue through the winter.

Throughout this entire process, it seems more and more likely that almost all the attacks are coming from dissident Iraqi elements, many of them still allied to the old regime. At least for now, there is little evidence of outside involvement of radical paramilitaries from elsewhere in the region. While such involvement has been anticipated by many analysts, it may well be still to come and may develop over a number of months.

The problems in Iraq are paralleled, if on a smaller scale, by developments over the past few months in Afghanistan. Although there is now an agreement that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) can be extended beyond Kabul, there is little commitment by outside governments to provide the resources to do so. At the same time, there has been an upsurge in attacks on Afghan government forces, including police and army units, as well as on foreign aid workers.

The United States retains some 10,000 troops in Afghanistan and has recently conducted major counter-insurgency operations before the onset of winter. The indications, though, are that Taliban militia are regrouping in several parts of eastern and south-eastern Afghanistan, most likely preparing for an increase in the insurgency next spring. Their recent strategy has been to attempt to avoid violent confrontations with US troops while building up their arms dumps and supply lines and recruiting further militias. The attacks on Afghan police and army units while avoiding conflict with US forces are aimed at making this easier during the coming winter.

In terms of the wider issue of paramilitary attacks by al-Qaida and its affiliates, there is evidence of a dispersal of these capabilities but coupled with a re-grouping in the wake of the original disruption of al-Qaida centres in Afghanistan. During November there were major bomb attacks in Riyadh and Istanbul killing nearly 70 people and injuring over 800.

On all three fronts, therefore, there are considerable security problems remaining for the United States and its closest allies, coupled with a prevailing mood in much of Europe that the policies that the Bush administration is pursuing in its "war on terror" are proving ineffective while being intensely costly in human terms.

In some areas, European influence has been in evidence at a political level. This has been most notable in relation to Iran, where US policy was originally directed towards regime change as a means of dealing with this core part of the "axis of evil". European policy has been directed much more towards engagement with the current

government in Tehran in the belief that moderation of Iranian policy on some key issues was possible.

A central aspect of the transatlantic difference has been the perceived status of Iran's presumed nuclear weapons programme, with the United States hoping to see a referral of Iran to the UN Security Council from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), with possible sanctions to follow. In the event, the IAEA refrained from this step, allowing some European governments to develop their engagement with Tehran as an alternative to a potential new crisis.

Even so, such a development does not relate greatly to the problems facing the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan and in its conflict with al-Qaida and its associates. On all of these counts, and especially in relation to Afghanistan, there are some significant transatlantic differences, but European opinion is unlikely to have much impact on the Bush administration. This may change if the US predicament worsens in Iraq, especially as the 2004 Presidential Election draws close, but there is little evidence of this so far.

Where European states could have an immediate impact would be to enhance their support for Afghanistan, not just in terms of an expansion of ISAF but also through substantially greater aid for post-conflict reconstruction. For the moment there is simply not the political will to do what is required, even though such moves are well within European capabilities. As long as that persists, it undermines any European credibility in criticising the United States and thereby delays a more substantial change in US policy.