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‘Iraq, Insurgency and US Plans’

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The capture of Saddam Hussein in the middle of December was heralded as a major break-through in terminating the insurgency facing US forces in Iraq. It was accompanied by a series of particularly vigorous counter-insurgency operations, especially in the “Sunni triangle” from which much of the opposition was arising. Informed US sources spoke of real progress in identifying and then isolating the handful of extended families believed to be key to the insurgency, and there was a confidence that these developments, in parallel with the detention of Saddam Hussein, would mean that serious progress was now being made by the United States.

For perhaps a week after Saddam Hussein’s detention, there seemed to be some reality to these hopes, although it was also evident that many attacks were continuing on those Iraqis seen as collaborators, even if US troops were experiencing fewer attacks and casualties. Within a fortnight, though, it was apparent that the insurgency was continuing much as before, with an increased emphasis on the destruction of the energy infrastructure, adding substantially to the petrol and other shortages already affecting much of the country.

During the latter part of December, US forces were again suffering numerous deaths and injuries, members of Iraqi political parties, the police force, judiciary and public service managers were being assassinated and, in the most damaging incident, key locations in the city of Karbala came under attack. The immediate effects of four different attacks in Karbala were the killing of five Bulgarian and two Thai soldiers, all members of the coalition forces, together with 12 Iraqis, as well as 30 coalition troops and 130 Iraqis injured.

Karbala is well south of Baghdad, away from the Sunni triangle, and has not recently been witness to major attacks, and these incidents were significant for two reasons. One was that they were aimed at non-US coalition troops and the other was that four carefully co-ordinated attacks could be mounted almost simultaneously, showing evidence of substantial powers of organisation among the insurgents.

In recent months it has not been easy to get a full idea of the casualties being experienced by US troops, although it has been known that at least 100 soldiers each week are being airlifted out of Iraq for medical treatment for wounds received in combat, with many others being evacuated for other health problems. Reasonably clear figures became available in mid-December and confirmed two suspicions. One was that the extensive use of body armour by US troops on patrol was saving many lives but was resulting in a much higher proportion of serious injuries, especially to

limbs and faces. The other was that the overall impact of the Iraq War on US forces has been substantial.

By 17 December, the US Department of Defence had airlifted almost 11,000 people from Iraq for medical reasons, many of them first going to Landstuhl military hospital in Germany but almost all then going on to the United States. Of this number, 2,273 were due to what were defined as “battle injuries”, including a substantial number of amputees. A further 3,800 were airlifted home because of non-combat injuries that included accidental discharge of fire-arms and large numbers of injuries from road accidents. Another 5,000 were evacuated for other health problems, both mental and physical, including depression and suicide attempts.

Such figures may still dwarf the US casualties in the Vietnam War but that war lasted for many years and involved hundreds of thousands of US troops on the ground. The Iraq War is only nine months old yet close to one in twelve of US troops in Iraq for most of that time have had to be evacuated back to the United States. This hardly sounds like a “mopping up” of remnants of the old regime.

In this context, and as the 2004 Presidential Election campaign gets under way in the United States, the situation in Iraq acquires a greater political significance, making it more and more necessary for the Bush administration to demonstrate progress towards stability. The manner in which this is to be achieved is now reasonably clear and has three elements.

The first is that large numbers of US troops will have to be stationed in Iraq for years to come, but they will be supported by even larger Iraqi security forces including police, pipeline guards, a resurrected army and even a newly constituted security agency drawn partly from members of the old agencies of the Saddam era. Some of these latter plans are already controversial and, in addition, it is proving difficult to train and retain soldiers in the Iraqi army and police force, especially as the latter come under persistent attack from the insurgents.

Secondly, some kind of transfer of authority to an Iraqi government is going to happen much quicker than was originally planned, with a provisional timetable set for the middle of 2004, comfortably ahead of the November Presidential Election in the US.

Finally, and perhaps most significant, is the manner in which this transfer to Iraqi rule will be overseen. Currently, the Coalition Provisional Authority is run out of the Pentagon but its activities are to be progressively transferred to the State Department. In taking over this role the State Department is planning the largest overseas diplomatic mission anywhere in the world with an Embassy in Baghdad staffed by over 3,000 personnel.

Such people will be recruited primarily to ensure a smooth transfer of power to an acceptable government, and this new Iraqi administration will find itself governing a country in which the US anticipates keeping 100,000 troops there even after the occupation ends. In essence, this will provide a bottom-line assurance that the new Iraqi government will be a client-regime of Washington, a circumstance that should

cause no surprise given the extraordinary importance of Iraqi oil reserves and the increased US dependence on imported oil.

In theory, then, 2004 will see a smooth transfer in Iraq to a system of government under long-term US influence, which, in turn, will be a valuable adjunct to President Bush's re-election prospects. In practice, though, the immediate insurgency continues, at considerable cost to the US military, and this alone could derail the current plans for Iraq.

Whatever happens in the short term, though, may turn out to be less significant than more distant developments. Over the next 3-5 years, the clear intention in Washington is to have Iraq as a centrepiece of US influence in the region, including a substantial military presence involving the establishment of permanent bases. In essence, this means the United States moving progressively from direct to indirect control of a major Arab state. It is possible that Washington may succeed in such an aim, but given the current level of insurgency it is far more likely that such a political environment will help ensure sustained if not enhanced support for al-Qaida and its affiliates. This, in turn is likely to set the region up for sustained instability throughout the current decade and beyond.