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‘A Widening War?’

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The expectation of an easing of the Iraq insurgency after the detention of Saddam Hussein was short-lived, with further violence in the latter part of December, much of its directed against Iraqi police and security forces. Even so, there was a more positive move within the US military in mid-January, with a number of commanders in Iraq stating openly that the insurgency really was now dying down.

Once again, this proved not to be the case, and the last ten days of January saw sustained attacks on US and Iraqi security forces, leading to a loss of life and injuries almost as severe as at the height of the previous worse month for the CPA in the previous November. One of the most damaging incidents was the attempt to attack the Coalition Provisional Authority's headquarters in Baghdad with a large truck bomb, an attack that caused many deaths and injuries and was intended to affect an attempt by the Bush administration to involve the UN more in the transition to Iraqi rule. This was followed by a series of suicide bombs directed at a police station in Mosul and both of the main Kurdish political party headquarters in Arbil, the latter killing more than 50 people.

At the end of the month, the issue of Iraq was, in Britain, dominated by the publication of the Hutton Report into the death of Dr David Kelly, but this coincided in the United States with an occasion of at least as great a significance – the resignation of David Kay as Head of the Iraq Survey Group followed by his evidence at congressional hearings that he no longer believed that active stocks of chemical or biological weapons would be found in Iraq.

In its own way, this would ordinarily have been a more significant development in Britain, given that the UK government had put a greater premium on Iraqi WMD programmes as a reason for war than had the Bush administration. In the event, it also began to develop as an issue in the United States for two quite different reasons.

One of these was the continuing loss of life among US troops in Iraq, with far more having been killed and injured in the months following the war than during the war itself. The other was the beginning of serious campaigning for the November Presidential Election, with potential Democrat candidates making much of the failure to find Iraqi WMD.

In an early counter to this, President Bush himself sought to determine why the intelligence had been wrong, leading to the prospect of an attempt to distance the White House from the apparently separate work of the intelligence agencies. This is likely to prove a risky if not counter-productive strategy as agencies such as the CIA

will be quick to focus on the weakness of this move, not least by highlighting the manner in which Paul Wolfowitz and others in the Pentagon effectively set up their own intelligence groups to provide the hardest evidence possible that there was such a programme. Their assessments were often at odds with others, especially those from the State Department and appear to have been based, in part, on the "sexing up" of raw intelligence from a number of sources and agencies.

Possibly the main reason why WMD issue was less important for the Bush administration in the lead up to last March's war was a widespread belief that a primary motive for destroying the regime was because of its links to paramilitary groups such as al-Qaida. This, too, has become difficult to maintain, given that al-Qaida and its associated groups have continued to be active elsewhere and have, indeed, even begun to move into Iraq since the largely secular regime of Saddam Hussein was terminated.

The problem here is that the two stated reasons for the war, an immediate threat from Iraq's WMD or the regime's links with al-Qaida, are hardly credible any longer, yet the crisis in Iraq continues, especially for the United States. Furthermore, the one other justification that can be used – the brutality of the regime and the consequent humanitarian requirement to end it – does not itself stand up to much scrutiny.

The Saddam Hussein regime itself lasted 24 years and for a large part of that time it was viewed with great favour by the United States, primarily because it was seen as a buffer against post-revolutionary Iran. In all the years of regime brutality and repression, the worst period was almost certainly the sustained assault on the Kurds in 1987-88, in what became called the Anfal, especially a series of military assaults during 1988 that included the use of chemical weapons against unprotected Kurdish civilians in the town of Halabjah in March 1988.

In spite of substantial reporting of the attacks in the weeks that followed, there was little condemnation of the regime from the United States. Instead, the US Navy fought a series of actions against the Iranians in the Persian Gulf involving strikes against oil terminals and engagements with the Iranian Navy that destroyed or damaged key elements of its small flotilla of modern warships.

While much of this has long been forgotten, the problem now facing the United States is that if Saddam Hussein is allowed to stand trial with any kind of competent legal defence team, such issues will be easy to raise at a time of intense international press interest.

As discussed in earlier articles in this series, one of the main responses to the insurgency in Iraq has been for the US forces to put much more emphasis on building up Iraqi police and security forces. In practice, though, the level of attacks on these forces has been so intense that it is now accepted that US troops will stay as occupying forces for a long time to come.

At the end of the first phase of the war, last April, it was expected that US force levels in Iraq would decline to about 70,000 by last September with further decreases in the following months as the troops were concentrated in the four permanent bases then envisaged. As of September there were still 130,000 troops present. In the next

three months those will be replaced by slightly smaller forces, but the Pentagon is now planning for the probability of retaining around 100,000 troops in Iraq for at least two years, as well as substantial numbers in Kuwait, one of the reasons why the US Army is increasing its overall troop strength by 30,000.

Meanwhile, the security situation in Afghanistan is little better. The planned creation of an Afghan National Army has proved deeply problematic, with 3,000 of the first 10,000 troops already deserting. There have been recent suicide bomb attacks on Canadian and British forces in Kabul, a number of US soldiers were recently killed in an explosion at an arms dump, and the past three months have seen numerous attacks on Afghan police and security forces.

Apart from troops at two planned bases near Kabul and Kandahar, the Pentagon had originally expected to be able to withdraw almost all its soldiers within six months of the end of the Taliban regime in 2002, but an upsurge in paramilitary activity has made this impossible and the United States still has around 10,000 troops there.

Many of the Taliban militia are able to operate within Afghanistan but many others are located across the border in Pakistan. The regime of General Musharraf is broadly supportive of the United States and the recent peace moves towards India may enable the Pakistani Army to ease its commitments in Kashmir. At the same time, it is a deeply unpopular policy among some of the more radical groups in Pakistan and there is serious concern in Washington over Musharraf's survival, given the two serious assassination attempts against him in recent months.

Taken together with the frequent warnings of further al-Qaida activity against transatlantic airlines, the continuing insurgency in Iraq, the paramilitary activity in Afghanistan and the risk of regime change in Pakistan all suggest to military planners and analysts in Washington that the United States has somehow to change its strategy in its "war on terror".

There are early indications that a major new military operation may now be under consideration, involving a substantial spring offensive in Eastern Afghanistan and North-West Pakistan, aiming to severely damage elements of the Taliban and kill or capture those elements of the leadership of al-Qaida, including Osama bin Laden, that are believed to be in Pakistan.

What this means is that two years after the end of the Taliban and a year after regime termination in Iraq, the United States is beginning to plan for further substantial military operations. These would be much more substantial than the small-scale actions that have already taken place in Pakistan and would mean that Pakistan is projected into the forefront of the war against al-Qaida, with all the dangers and possible consequences that that could involve.