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‘Iraq, al-Qaida and the US Presidential Election’

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At the start of the year, the prospect of President Bush getting a second term in November looked strong. There were some difficult issues, not least the rapidly growing federal budget deficit, and continuing problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even so, there were several factors favouring the Republicans.

Among these was the persistence of George W. Bush's image as a war leader, coupled with the domestic effect of the capture of Saddam Hussein. The impact of his detention was substantially greater in the United States than in Europe or the rest of the world, primarily because a significant minority of the American public had accepted the idea that the termination of his regime was directly linked to the "war on terror". In the eyes of many, Saddam Hussein himself was apparently connected to al-Qaida, even to the extent of having some kind of involvement in the 9/11 attacks. With Saddam Hussein captured, there was an assumption that the insurgency in Iraq would rapidly diminish, leading to an orderly transition to a quasi-independent Iraqi state friendly to the United States. This would usefully be in the immediate run-up to the US presidential election in November.

Perhaps more significant still was the state of the Democrat opposition, with numerous contenders vying with each other and the prospect of such divisive internal campaigning going on right through to the Democrat Convention in Boston in July.

Two months into the New Year, the situation looks markedly different. The choice of Democrat contender is down to two people, with Kerry the near-certain choice and evidently capable of presenting a strong challenge. The situation in Iraq remains troubled, with a string of American casualties each week, as well as deep insecurity in many parts of the country. In addition, it has become more apparent in the last four weeks that circumstances in Afghanistan are anything but stable, with every prospect of a renewed insurgency in the spring and early summer.

In such circumstances, and unusually in terms of US domestic politics, international issues may play a major role in a presidential election, and an immediate result of this has been the development of a series of strategies that are designed, in part, to counter these problems.

In Iraq, there have been two parallel developments. One has been the withdrawal of US troops from many urban areas through a substantial scaling-down of patrols, the closure of many of the smaller garrisons and the restricting of US forces to fewer bases, all much more heavily protected. The numbers of US troops in Iraq remain

high, but there is now much more emphasis on large military bases away from the urban areas.

Along with this change in deployment patterns, far more emphasis has been placed on recruiting Iraqi security forces, especially the police, in the hope that they will take over many of the security functions. It is a process that is being rushed, and has already run into problems as the police themselves come under frequent attack. Even so, this policy will persist in the hope that it will reduce the rate at which the US forces are taking casualties.

One of the immediate surprises here is that the US casualty rate remains substantial, in spite of restriction on patrols and the introduction of numerous technologies and tactics to counter the ambushes and remote-controlled bombs. It appears that the insurgents are also adapting to new circumstances.

The second development has been the insistence on handing over nominal power to an Iraqi administration. This has become a central plank of US policy towards Iraq, even though there are no plans to hold early elections and the United States is planning to keep over 100,000 troops in the country for up to three years. What is important to the Bush administration is that it will be able to say, by mid-summer, that it is no longer the legal occupying power in Iraq, thereby decreasing its own responsibility for the state of insecurity.

At the same time, though, there is no lack of people in Washington who recognise that the wider "war on terror" is not being won. Moreover, there is a fear that a Taliban offensive in Afghanistan will develop just as the presidential election campaign is reaching its peak. There is thus a premium on controlling such a development, with the additional possibility that Osama bin Laden himself may be killed or captured.

Such an analysis does much to explain the intensive military operations now being developed in eastern Afghanistan, in conjunction with coordinated action by the Pakistani Army in North-West Pakistan. As mentioned in last month's analysis, this is turning out to be a much larger mobilisation than had been expected, involving many of the 10,000 US troops currently in Afghanistan together with special forces troops from the US and UK and an array of intelligence and surveillance capabilities.

The expectation is that these military operations, likely to last for two to three months, will at the very least limit the Taliban capability to develop a renewed insurgency, or at least postpone it for a year, comfortably after the November election in the United States. In addition, though, there is the possibility that the action in Afghanistan and Pakistan might lead to the death or capture of Osama bin Laden, a prize that could have a direct effect on Bush's re-election prospects.

It is here that a remarkable irony is demonstrated. For the planners and strategists within the al-Qaida network of organisations, there is a recognition that the best result for the November election, from their point of view, would actually be the re-election of George Bush. This would ensure the vigorous further pursuit of the American "war on terror", including a continued determination to re-make the Middle East that would encompass ongoing support for the Sharon government or a possible Netanyahu successor. The US presence in the Middle East would be maintained,

Guantanamo and other detention centres would retain their prisoners and recruitment of paramilitaries into the al-Qaida network would be enhanced.

A Democrat in the White House would not necessarily involve a radical change in US security policy, but it would diminish the ideological element that lies behind much of the US Middle East policy. This would be replaced with a more pragmatic approach that might work rather more closely with European allies, be somewhat less insistent in maintaining control of oil-rich Iraq and generally be more liable to limit the current extent of military engagement. All of this would be something of a temporary hindrance for al-Qaida and its associates and their longer-term aims for the region. For them, a second Bush term is much more attractive.

This leaves us with an extraordinary situation should Osama bin Laden be killed or captured in the coming weeks or months. The impact of such an event might be to increase Mr Bush's chances of re-election while serving to improve the longer-term status of al-Qaida and its associates. What would be hailed as the greatest US success in its war on terror might actually result in greater opposition to the United States in the Middle East and beyond, and even an intensification of that war.