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‘A Turning Point?’

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During March, much of the focus of President Bush’s “war on terror” was on developments in Pakistan and Spain. In the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, extensive operations by the Pakistani Army, working in parallel with US units in Eastern Afghanistan, were expected to lead to significant detentions of senior al-Qaida operatives, including possibly Osama bin Laden himself. In the event, Pakistani military operations proved much more difficult than had been anticipated – while the operations continued into April, and may still have the intended effect, the early indications are that there has been minimal disruption of al-Qaida operatives and associates of the Taliban.

The investigations following the Madrid train bombings resulted in a number of arrests and the deaths of several suspects in an explosion in a Madrid suburb. What became clear as the investigations proceeded was that the attack had been planned over a number of months, was principally related to radical elements from Morocco, and involved a substantial number of people able to operate without being intercepted by the Spanish counter-terrorism forces.

Towards the end of March, there was concern over increased violence in Uzbekistan and also in Southern Thailand. While there was subsequently little further violence in Uzbekistan, at the end of April, Thai police and paramilitary forces engaged in a major operation against insurgents, killing about a hundred people. In Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, there was a bomb attack on a police headquarters in Riyadh and a shooting incident in an oil company headquarters in the port city of Yanbu in the west of Saudi Arabia. Six people were killed, with this causing particular concern among the expatriate community.

In Iraq, March had been a difficult month for the occupying powers, with an increase in attacks on US forces and a growing problem of kidnapping of expatriates. Even so, the US leadership of the coalition was still planning to hand over some power to an interim government by 30 June, and considerable effort was being put into the policy of recruiting and training Iraqi police, paramilitary and army units, even though the police, in particular, had suffered numerous attacks from insurgents during the previous few months, with several hundred people killed.

Iraq – the worst month

Against this background, April was a far worse month for the United States and, by the end of the month, there were indications that the insurgency might be turning into a more general uprising. Several aspects of the developments during the month are of note and are relevant to attempting to analyse the significance of current trends.

The first concerns the city of Fallujah. In response to the killing and mutilation of four US security guards, elements of the US Marine Corps attempted to take control of much of the city. There followed considerable violence, a siege of the city and the persistent use of heavy firepower, including the powerful AC-130 gunships. US casualties were substantial, but those among insurgents and civilians were very much higher. Possibly 600 people were killed in the city, and independent observers reported that the majority were civilians.

Some Arab TV channels had teams within the city, and TV pictures of the casualties and physical damage had a substantial effect across much of the Middle East. Partly because of the effects of such publicity, US forces ultimately refrained from an all-out assault on the city and a withdrawal was eventually negotiated involving a proposal to pass over security to a reconstituted Iraqi army force with a former general in command.

Coalition sources denied strenuously that the Marines withdrawal from Fallujah was a setback, representing it as a “mature repositioning of forces”, but the effect within much of Iraq and the Arab world was of a presumption of defeat by the occupying power.

While facing problems in Fallujah, US forces were also beset with an insurgency centred on militias loyal to a radical Shi’ite cleric, Moqtada Sadr. The focus for opposition to US occupation was principally the city of Najaf, but the Sadr City district of Baghdad was also a centre of resistance. During the course of April, US forces appeared prepared to capture or kill Moqtada Sadr, even though this would be likely to lead to a substantial increase in support for his cause, and confrontations between US forces and Sadr’s militia at Kufa resulted in the deaths of more than 60 Iraqis. In the event, the US military did not eventually seek to take control of Najaf, with this being seen as a further indication of the limitations of their power.

The third development in April, following the problems in Fallujah and Najaf, was a more general upsurge in violence against US and other coalition forces. For the United States, April was the worst month since the start of the war, even including the first month of intense fighting last year. 129 US soldiers were killed and some 900 injured. With the intensity of conflict, there were some indications that the costs of the war were starting to have an effect in the United States itself, with opinion polls beginning to show substantial slippage in support for the war.

Coalition Problems

Back in Iraq, though, four further factors are, when taken together, causing fundamental concern. One is the conspicuous failure of the coalition-trained Iraqi security forces to fight alongside US troops in containing the violence. Almost invariably, police units have refrained from getting involved and units of the Iraqi army have actually refused to take part in operations in the Fallujah area. Given that the formation of large internal Iraqi security forces is a core part of the US policy for maintaining security in the country, this represents a very substantial failure with considerable implications for the future.

Related to this has been another effect of the substantial increase in violence and insecurity. This has been the near-cessation of a wide range of reconstruction

projects, stemming partly from the withdrawal of contractors from the country, or at least the location of their personnel in safe areas such as the “green zone” in Baghdad. Another development has been the decision of the US military to close some major highways in order to ensure the security of convoys, with this having a knock-on effect on the domestic economy. With the hot summer weather imminent, there is now concern that power supplies will be inadequate to provide basic services at a time when the economy is already being seriously damaged.

Thirdly, during the course of April, Spain confirmed that its force of over 1,500 troops would be withdrawn, with Honduras following suit and the prospect of several other countries doing likewise. Although the United Nations, meanwhile has been engaged in trying to foster an effective transfer of power to a caretaker Iraqi government, it is becoming less certain that this will prove feasible in the short timescale originally planned.

Finally, reports of the harassment, abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners of the US occupying power have been widely circulated in the Middle East. They tend to confirm what has been common knowledge in Iraq, where information from prisoners released from custody has frequently indicated that such treatment has been widespread.

The Israel Connection

In addition to all of these issues relating to Iraq, there are two other factors to consider concerning the wider impact of President Bush’s “war on terror”. The first is the policy of the Sharon government in Israel, most notably the targeted assassination of the Hamas leadership and the lack of US opposition to such actions. Across the Arab world and beyond, the closeness of the relationship between the United States and Israel is such that the current US occupation in Iraq is seen essentially as part of a wider collaborative plan to shape the future of the Arab world.

Whatever the validity of such a perception, it is deeply ingrained and persistent. Moreover, it is aided by the other factor – the accelerating impact of satellite TV news channels such as al-Jazeera. Because of the existence of such outlets there is intense and continual coverage of the actions of US and Israeli forces in Iraq and the occupied territories respectively, with graphic images shown that are rarely seen on western TV networks.

Implications

Two conclusions can be drawn from the events of April 2004, neither of them being positive for the Bush administration. One is that there has been a further increase in opposition to the policies of the Bush administration across much of the “majority world”. At the very least this will tend to increase the recruitment potential for radical movements such as al-Qaida.

The other is that Iraq may now be at the point where a series of insurgencies could coalesce into a more general uprising or *intifada*. If that is so, then there is a very strong case for a complete reappraisal of the current policies of the Bush administration and its more influential coalition partners.