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‘Problems on Two Fronts’

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The difficulties faced by the US forces in Iraq have yet to have a major impact on domestic politics in the United States, not least because Senator Kerry’s campaign team is cautious about excessive criticism of George W Bush for fear of appearing unpatriotic. One effect of this is to give Mr Bush a certain breathing space, and the apparent handover to an Iraqi administration may also help by giving the impression of the creation of an independent Iraq.

In practice, it becomes increasingly apparent that a tightly controlled client regime in Baghdad is now being developed, led by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi with his previous links with western intelligence agencies. There will theoretically be a handover from the Coalition Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer, but the new US Embassy will be the world’s largest, US personnel will dominate the country’s development and security will remain under the control of the US military.

To an extent, though, the impression can be given of a handover to a civil power, perhaps even with a short-term assumption that there will be a decline in the violence. The supporting evidence for this, though, is minimal. During the course of May, US forces only ended the violence in Fallujah by consolidating a truce that effectively made the city a “no-go” area for coalition troops, leaving the city under the control of local militia.

Najaf, too, was not occupied, although one US military action there is likely to have long-term implications. This was the protracted and damaging exchange of fire in and around the vast cemetery close to the main mosque. There appears to have been no understanding on the part of the US military commanders that engaging in combat and using substantial firepower in such a sacred area would have a profound long-term effect on Shi’ite opinion.

US commanders would say that they had no alternative, given the probable location of paramilitaries in the cemetery, but this is not the point. Such members of militias may well use cemeteries and mosques for shelter, but that in no way diminishes the impact of occupying forces fighting their way through these areas. To be colloquial, US forces may object to fighting with one hand tied behind their back, but that is exactly the nature of the predicament they now face in Iraq.

In the Sadr city district of Baghdad, unrest and conflict continued throughout May, and it is probable that the death toll among the Shi’ite communities during the month was close to a thousand. Coalition troops, especially Americans, took heavy casualties as well, as did Iraqi

police and civil defence units, but additional concerns were being raised in two quite different ways by the end of the month.

The first relates to the potential for insurgents to have a much greater impact on Iraqi reconstruction. Over the past few months it has become clear that the insurgents may well be divided into a number of groups, yet they have a capacity for action that is much greater than had been realised. Many are drawn from Shi'ite militants, others may have links with the old Ba'ath party, some stem from small radical Islamic groups that were already operating in Iraq, some represent a new type of Iraqi nationalism, and there are also some foreign paramilitaries now operating in the country.

The extent to which different groups may cooperate is far from clear, but their levels of organisation are considerable and they could yet coalesce into a broadly-based uprising. The various groups still have access to large quantities of munitions, many of them secreted away in the past year from the arsenals held by the old regime. While some of the Shi'ite militia may not have had much in the way of military training, many others, especially from the Sunni communities, were involved in the Special Republican Guard and brigades attached to the old security agencies, and those paramilitaries entering Iraq from elsewhere will almost certainly have appropriate training. Meanwhile, the new Iraqi army is not proving reliable in its support for US forces, and the police force is continuing to be subject to repeated attacks.

Behind all this lies a real fear within the Coalition Provisional Authority that some of the insurgents are biding their time and have the capacity to cause much greater economic destruction than they have so far tried to do. In particular, there is a suspicion that insurgents have actually been holding back from attacking electricity supplies, and their targeting of oil facilities has been far below their capabilities.

It follows that there may be a more substantive strategy at work – the with-holding of some insurgent actions until closer to the date of the theoretical handover of power. If this is the case, then the key period is going to be the three months from June to August. This will be at the height of the summer heat, when a new government is taking control, and when Iraq most needs its oil revenues. Recent insecurity has already had a massive effect on reconstruction, with many projects on hold. A further upsurge in attacks could destabilise any new government, forcing the US military planners to take on a more high-profile security role and therefore demonstrating to people in Iraq and beyond that a client regime is in place in Baghdad and it is the United States that is really calling the shots.

Such potential instability links in with the second issue - what is already happening in Saudi Arabia. Here, the past two months has seen an upsurge in attacks from paramilitary groups at least loosely related to al-Qaida, including an attack on an oil industry company in Yanbu and the killing of a German expatriate in Riyadh. Most significant of all was the attack on a series of offices in Khobar, at the heart of the Saudi oil industry, followed by hostage-taking in a well-protected residential compound.

Give the dispersal of the Saudi oil industry, none of this means an immediate disruption of exports, but the longer-term significance is very much in the direction of uncertainty in the international oil markets. Perhaps the key issue is whether the events in Iraq and Saudi

Arabia are connected. This could be in the form of a degree of planning and coordination by strategists within al-Qaida, or else it could be more a matter of common cause, with no one person or group at the centre.

On balance it is more likely to be the latter, and this has considerable implications for the United States and its coalition partners. If there is a degree of central organisation behind current developments in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, then it may be possible to pre-empt some actions or at least acquire intelligence on the strategy. If it is more amorphous and is arising more or less spontaneously from current circumstances, as seems to be the case, then responding in the conventional forms of counter-terrorism actions will be a further case of treating the symptoms while failing to address the causes. It is an approach that will remain as counter-productive as it has for almost the whole of the three years since 9/11.