

International Security Monthly Briefing

June 2004

Transfer of Power or Client Regime?

Professor Paul Rogers

Towards the end of May there was some respite in Iraq from the intense conflicts of the previous month, not least with a substantial decrease in the activities of most of the militias associated with Moqtada al-Sadr. There was also a temporary halt to the violence in the largely Sunni city of Fallujah, although the developments that took place there may have a longer-term significance for the future of the insurgency.

Essentially, US marines refrained from the use of their overwhelming firepower against paramilitaries in the city, not least because the several hundred casualties and physical destruction of the previous month had been widely reported across the region and had also failed to bring about the defeat of the insurgents.

The situation was eased, at least for the time being, by a decision of US military commanders to allow an Iraqi military force drawn largely from the former Iraqi Army to take control of the city. This was, in a sense, an admission that the costs of US control of the city would be unacceptable, but the problem for the US military was that it quickly became apparent that the 'official' Iraqi units were working in close collaboration with the paramilitaries. During the course of June, Iraqi journalists were able to report that paramilitaries were running roadblocks, working with the Iraqi units and even seeking to impose religious laws on parts of the city. Fallujah was therefore effectively under the partial control of the insurgents and this was a situation that the United States was not in a position to counter.

The Political Transition in Iraq

In the country as a whole, preparations for a handover to an appointed interim government were accelerated, and it became clear that this handover would have four significant elements. The first was that the pace of training of Iraqi police, civil defence and paramilitary forces would be speeded up in the hope that they would take over many of the public order and anti-insurgency functions previously in the hands of the coalition military forces.

The second element, following on directly from this, was that US military forces would seek to scale down the intensity of their own patrol activities, thereby reducing their exposure to attacks by insurgents. This could be a particularly important development for the Bush administration given the domestic political significance of further casualties in an election year.

The third element, though, was that there remained a determination to use considerable force whenever this was thought necessary, including substantial bombing attacks by strike aircraft against potential insurgent targets. Presumed insurgent locations in Fallujah, for example, were subject to repeated attacks towards the end of June, often resulting in civilian casualties.

Finally, towards the end of the month, the nature of the interim government - the new regime of Prime Minister Allawi - was beginning to become clear and to have many of the components of a client regime. In one of his final acts before departing, for example, the US head of the old Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer, ensured that inspectors-general were appointed to oversight roles in numerous Iraqi ministries. He also ensured that newly appointed heads of key security and intelligence offices would have five-year terms, thereby remaining in power whatever government might eventually be elected.

Mr Bremer's effective successor is Ambassador John Negroponte, a highly experienced diplomat who has, previously in his career, overseen US operations in support of strongly pro-American governments in countries in Central America. In Iraq, Ambassador Negroponte will head the largest embassy of any country anywhere in the world. Furthermore, this will be an embassy with 200 staff allocated to Iraqi ministries and will also have four major regional centres and five sub-centres stretching across the country. It will, in other words, ensure a significant US presence throughout the Iraqi instruments of governance.

Coupled with an aid programme that is close to bankrolling many of the country's economic activities, it becomes apparent that a fully-fledged client regime is being established. Moreover, early moves by the new regime have included the establishment of a range of emergency powers including provisions for martial law, and suggestions that the security situation may require a delay in the elections provisionally planned for early in 2005.

In effect, what has emerged is an Iraqi regime that maintains a remarkably close relationship with the United States, and seems set to do so for a prolonged period. Moreover, there are no indications of any withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, and there are reports that current troop levels of around 140,000 could actually be maintained for several years. Coupled with continuing commitments in Afghanistan, this does much to explain the problems of overstretch facing the US military, problems that are requiring redeployment of US troops away from South Korea and preparations to call up several thousand more reservists.

The NATO Summit

At the end of June, the introduction of the Allawi regime was brought forward two days, partly for security reasons but also because it then coincided with the NATO Heads of State meeting in Istanbul. While it was possible to represent the changes in Iraq as a

move towards a possible democratic rule, the outcome of the NATO summit itself was less easy to present in a positive light.

The Bush administration had initially hoped for a clear commitment of increased numbers of troops for Iraq from NATO member states, not least to relieve pressure on its own forces. This commitment was not forthcoming and, more significantly in the circumstances, it was not even possible to persuade alliance members to allow NATO to take over the leadership of the multilateral coalition division operating in southern Iraq, a move which, from Washington's perspective, would at least have involved NATO formally in Iraq.

There is separate pressure on NATO, not least from Mr Karzai in Afghanistan, to increase its commitment to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), so that its remit can spread out beyond Kabul to other cities and also to main transport routes. In the event, nothing more than a very modest increase in commitments was forthcoming.

At one level, it is obvious that most western European states are thoroughly anxious to avoid any increased commitments in Iraq, not least because of the uncertainty surrounding the intensity of the insurgency. While this may well be understandable, it is possible to level much more substantial criticism at European responses to the predicament in Afghanistan.

UN diplomats, Afghan government officials, NGO specialists and independent analysts are virtually unanimous in the view that Afghanistan is simply not getting the security and development assistance it urgently needs. Much of the country remains under the control of warlords, opium production has increased massively and parts of southeast and eastern Afghanistan remain subject to a persistent Taliban insurgency.

The United States and some coalition partners are maintaining at least 15,000 troops in those latter parts of the country fighting a counter-insurgency war, but this has been made more difficult because the Pakistani Army, across the border, has had little success in curbing insurgent activity in its border regions.

The danger for the Karzai administration is that the continuing problems of instability, warlordism and chronic underdevelopment in the rest of Afghanistan will ensure that the power of the warlords remains and a democratic transition will therefore prove extremely difficult. It may even make it possible for a more general Taliban resurgence to develop. For these reasons alone, the failure of western states to offer greatly increased assistance appears remarkably shortsighted. In one small but significant move, though, there are some indications that the UK government might actually increase its commitment to ISAF rather than increase the troop numbers in Iraq. This appeared, though, an exception to the rule within NATO.

Al-Qaida in Saudi Arabia

During the course of June, paramilitary actions continued in Saudi Arabia and there were indications of a strategy emerging that is rather different from the presumed strategy of the al-Qaida consortium towards the Kingdom. In terms of its general aims, the al-Qaida group has three short-term perspectives and one overall aim, the entire strategy being seen as evolving over several decades. In the short-term, there is the requirement to force foreign troops out of the western Gulf states, to bring about the downfall of the Royal House of Saud as the unacceptable Keeper of the Two Holy Places and, a more peripheral aim, to aid the creation of a Palestinian state. The longer-term aim is the establishment of 'acceptable' Islamist governance, initially across the Middle East and perhaps in the manner of a renewed caliphate.

The assumption among many analysts has been that much of the concentration of al-Qaida's activities would be on the aim of destroying the House of Saud, but a strategy may now be emerging that is much more geared to producing a sense of insecurity in the Kingdom to the extent that the House of Saud is unable to cope. At the same time, and especially if there is a progressive withdrawal of western expatriates from the Kingdom, people sympathetic to al-Qaida's aims might acquire greater power and influence within the Kingdom.

This would amount to change from within rather than an attempt to instigate the violent overthrow of the Kingdom. The belief behind such a strategy is that violent overthrow would be bound to bring in a strong US military reaction, given the extraordinary importance of the Saudi oil supplies. While such a US intervention might spark a radical response, the ensuring instability could set back the economic development of the Kingdom and surrounding states. As such, it might be better to effect internal political change that might still have the longer-term outcome of the decline and fall of the House of Saud.

Israel and Iraq

In Israel, violence has continued, with by far the greatest loss of life in the last two months being experienced by the Palestinians, especially in Gaza. The harsh counter-insurgency actions of the Israeli Defence Forces continue to be widely reported across the Middle East, as do the strong links between the Israeli and US military in matters such as training and equipment for urban counter-insurgency operations. This tends to reinforce the view in much of the Arab world that a joint Israeli-American operation is in progress in the region, and this view is being further reinforced by reports of Israeli involvement in Kurdish areas of Iraq.

With the implied consent of the US occupying forces in the region, it appears that Israeli Special Forces have been active in training Kurdish military units, with this enabling an Israeli involvement to develop within Iraq. Motives for such an involvement may include the ability to support Kurds in Syria against the Syrian government, connections between

Iraqi and Iranian Kurds leading to improved intelligence about Iranian nuclear ambitions, and increased influence in Kurdish Iraq itself with its substantial oil reserves.

There may also be a view in Israel that the US predicament in Iraq is unsustainable and that chaotic conditions may develop that could cause a degree of regional instability. In such circumstances, Israeli influence in the one ethnic group that has the most highly organised military forces, the Iraqi Kurds, could be of value to Israel itself.

The impact of such an Israeli involvement could be considerable. It is likely to cause substantial concern in neighbouring Iran, perhaps enabling the more rigid theocratic elements to consolidate power. It is also likely to further reinforce the wider Arab perception of exceptionally close links between Israel and the United States.

Overview

In seeking to gain a general perspective on developments in the Middle East, three issues have emerged recently. One is confirmation that the United States is retaining effective control of security in Iraq and has political influence over the Allawi government in Baghdad to the extent that it is a client regime. The second is the probable emergence of an al-Qaida strategy for Saudi Arabia that may seek to avoid the violent overthrow of the House of Saud while gaining influence on Saudi governance to effect an increasing degree of control from within.

Finally, a significant if little-noticed development has been the involvement of Israel in the Kurdish areas of Iraq. This latter development may turn out to be the most significant of all, suggesting that US neo-conservative thinking on the need for the region to be re-shaped by the United States working in conjunction with Israel is a project that is very much in progress. The reaction to such a development may be slow in coming, but it may ultimately ensure a violent response that could see the instability in Iraq extend to involve both Iran and Syria.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His monthly international security briefings are available from the ORG website at <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm>.

Professor Rogers' monthly briefings from May 2003 – April 2004 are collected in the Oxford Research Group international security report for 2004, *Iraq and the War on Terror*. More information is available from <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/books/iraqandwaronterror.htm>.
