

International Security Monthly Briefing

July 2004

Iran comes into the Frame

Professor Paul Rogers

Iraq

The US policy towards Iraq that became apparent in the run-up to the establishment of the Allawi regime (see June briefing in this series) was consolidated during the course of July. The elements of the policy were relatively complex but had the aim of ensuring a degree of stability in the country while attempting to avoid large numbers of US casualties.

The Allawi regime was duly established at the end of June, supported by a substantial US Embassy (the world's largest), which effectively replaced the Coalition Provisional Authority. With senior officials appointed to every government ministry and with a number of regional offices, the Embassy has the capacity to oversee the evolution of the Allawi regime and its maintenance as a client state supported by around 140,000 US troops and up to 30,000 coalition troops from other countries, principally the UK, Poland, Ukraine and Italy.

US troops, in particular, have sought to reduce their presence in the form of routine patrols, but are willing to use substantial firepower, particularly from helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, when considered necessary. At the same time, determined efforts have been made to accelerate the training of Iraqi police and security forces in order to decrease the Allawi regime's dependence on US forces.

In the first month of the new regime, there have been substantial indications that the policy is flawed and may be unworkable. If so, this is likely to mean considerable violence and suffering within Iraq in addition to a significant impact on domestic politics in the United States. One early indicator, for example, was that 54 US troops were killed in July compared with 42 in June, and there was also a substantial increase in the number of injuries, with over 650 troops injured during the month, nearly 300 of them sustaining serious injuries.

For the Iraqi authorities, July also marked a continuing pattern of kidnappings, car bombs, mortar and rocket attacks and many other forms of violence. Many of the attacks were directed against the police and civil defence forces but the trend towards the assassination of politicians and senior civil servants also continued.

For the Allawi regime, perhaps the most serious problem is that neither it nor the US forces have control over a number of towns and cities in much of central Iraq. Since the intense fighting in Fallujah in April, that city and the surrounding towns and villages have been effectively under the control of insurgents. Among supporters of the

insurgents, both in Iraq and beyond, Fallujah is being seen as a “liberated city” and is assumed by them to be the first of many.

In practice, there are already examples of other towns and cities, such as Samarra, where governmental control is minimal. Such a situation also exists in some major Shi'a centres of population including the large Sadr City slum area of Baghdad and the religious centre of Najaf. Some analysts are arguing that the Allawi regime, in reality, only has control of Baghdad and some of the surrounding towns, together with partial control of Basra. This is probably an exaggeration, but it does appear to be the case that the first month of the regime saw an increase in the loss of central control in Iraq as a whole.

Within the United States, the impact of the continuing violence has been relatively low, primarily because the domestic media interest in Iraq has diminished with the departure of the head of the CPA, Paul Bremer, the relatively low profile of his effective successor, Ambassador John Negroponte, and the installation of the Allawi regime.

At a superficial level, therefore, it can be argued that Iraq is no longer under US control, one of the results being a degree of media disinterest. This is similar to the attitude to Afghanistan, where US interest in aiding the civil reconstruction of that country is minimal and the emphasis remains on counter-insurgency.

Afghanistan

In spite of the lack of concern with Afghanistan in the United States as a whole, the situation within the country itself remains deeply problematic. Warlords are in control of much of the country, opium poppy growing has expanded hugely and the Afghan government has only limited influence beyond Kabul. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been quite effective in supporting local security and police forces in the capital, and some Provincial Reconstruction Teams in other towns and cities have also had a positive effect.

External peacekeeping assistance has, however, been far below that required – most independent analysts see the need for a force of up to 30,000 troops, but even the expansion of ISAF that followed the NATO summit in Istanbul at the end of June will not take it above 10,000. Afghanistan is also lacking the level of civil assistance required, even if some progress is being made in areas such as voter registration.

Meanwhile, there are indications that the United States has further increased its counter-insurgency operations in the east and southeast of the country, with as many as 20,000 combat troops now stationed in the country, the largest force to be deployed there so far. Over the past six months the US forces have sought to work with Pakistani Army units, with the latter operating in border areas such as South Waziristan. In a number of military operations undertaken since March, Pakistani forces have attempted to disrupt Taliban and other movements. There have been some deaths or detentions of significant militants, but the effects have been far less than had been hoped or expected.

Indeed, during the course of June and July there have been indications that Taliban and other militia have become much more adept at operating in circumstances in which the US forces can rely on a wide range of satellite and aerial reconnaissance systems backed up by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft for rapid attacks against identified targets. The insurgents have responded by operating in small groups and engaging in short-term military actions designed to allow them to melt away rapidly into local populations.

On the one hand this means that a wholesale Taliban revival is difficult to envisage but, against this, even the most sophisticated counter-insurgency systems available to the United States do not seem able to bring the Taliban insurgency under control, even with the recent substantial troop reinforcements. The end result is that the United States is likely to find itself committed to a long-term military involvement in Afghanistan at a time of increasing overstretch in its forces, especially the US Army, where the call-up of further groups of reserves is now anticipated.

Iran

The June briefing reported the involvement of Israeli Special Forces in training Kurdish military units in northeast Iraq, further supporting the view across much of the Arab world that the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime was, to an extent, a US/Israeli operation – part of a long term strategy of ensuring the control of Arab oil. Whatever the truth of such a perception, there was also the issue of the impact of such Israeli involvement on political developments in Iran.

In the past two months there has been a marked increase in the anti-Iranian rhetoric of elements of the Bush administration, with insistence that the policy of states such as Britain, France and Germany – engagement rather than confrontation – is failing in the face of continued Iranian commitments to nuclear weapons developments. Iranian officials continue to insist that they only have a civil nuclear power programme. The view within the Bush administration, however, is that conservative theocrats are firmly and fully in control in Tehran and that a key part of their policy is to use civil nuclear developments as a front for the rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The view of Iran as a major danger in the region is deep-seated in Washington and stretches well beyond the immediate neo-conservative lobby within the Bush administration. It goes right back to the fall of America's close ally, the Shah of Iran, at the end of the 1970s, the rise of theocratic governance and, in particular, the Tehran hostage crisis in 1980 when over 50 US diplomats were held for many months by the new revolutionary regime.

Opposition to the Tehran regime was a prime reason for US support for Saddam Hussein during the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq War in 1986-88, and current opposition stems also from a deeply held Israeli belief that Iran is its greatest threat in the entire region. Whether or not Iran is planning to develop nuclear weapons though, it is useful to sense the perspective on the current crisis as seen from the viewpoint of conservative theocratic elements in Tehran. Given that the relatively reformist government in Tehran has failed to deliver those reforms demanded by many young Iranians, it is certainly the case that theocratic elements have considerable power within the country, and this is unlikely to diminish in the short term.

Ever since the period of the Shah's rule, the United States has been seen by such elements as wanting to maintain influence, of not indirect rule, in Iran. This perception has, in Iranian conservative eyes, reached a new peak since the installation of the Bush Presidency in 2001 and the subsequent declaration of Iran as one of three members of the "axis of evil". Since then, one of the other members, the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, has been terminated by forceful military action.

Iran now finds itself with about 140,000 US troops on its immediate western borders, with many tens of thousands more troops in Kuwait and other western gulf states. It sees the reconstituted US Fifth Fleet operating unhindered in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, as well as having Afghanistan, immediately to the east in a state of disarray which includes a further 20,000 US troops fighting a counter-guerrilla war. This is also in addition to instability in the Caucasus, where there is ongoing competition for pipeline routes, not least as the United States, in Tehran's eyes, seeks to limit the involvement of Iran in the transport of oil resources from the region.

Although away from Iran's immediate vicinity, recent US involvement in Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan is seen as further proof of Washington's desire to exert control across the wider region. The final factor is the recent Israeli involvement in Iraq, right on Iran's northwest border, with this involvement being impossible without the active agreement of the United States.

Taking all the factors together, it is possible to get some understanding of what could be a strong Iranian perception of substantial vulnerability to external interference, if not a threat to the regime itself. It is a declared part of the "axis of evil", one part of that axis has been terminated and Iran itself is now largely surrounded by US forces.

There may well be a degree of paranoia in all of this – after all, the United States is hugely pre-occupied in very difficult military situations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and surely does not have time to take on Iran as well. Against this, though, is the increasingly strident rhetoric coming out of Washington, the Israeli presence in neighbouring Iraq, and the risk of a military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, either by the United States or by Israel.

There is one further factor that is likely to be affecting Iranian attitudes. The third "member" of the axis is North Korea, and this, too, has been the subject of strong rhetoric from Washington. Here, though, there is some evidence to suggest that North Korea has succeeded in putting together a very primitive nuclear arsenal, perhaps a handful of devices, and also has very strong conventional forces close to heavily populated parts of South Korea. North Korea appears to have gone ahead and supplemented conventional strength with a crude nuclear deterrent, and this has resulted in diminished rhetoric from Washington and an apparent determination to avoid a crisis, even to the extent of engaging in a degree of negotiation, possibly in concert with China.

To put it crudely, the view from Tehran may well be that North Korea is under less "threat" than it was three years ago, whereas the vulnerability of Iran has increased. From such a perception, three policies would be expected to arise. One would be the rapid development of a deterrent capability, however crude and limited in extent. The

second would be an attempt to do this in a thoroughly decentralised manner, making military pre-emption by the United States or Israel more difficult, and the third would be to provide more aid to insurgents in Iraq in order to further pre-occupy US forces in that country.

The problem is that any such options, however necessary from Tehran's perception, are precisely those options that will make it more likely that US or Israeli pre-emptive military action will actually take place. This could even be in the immediate run-up to the US Presidential election in November.

In such a context, the Western European approach of seeking engagement with Tehran may currently be viewed with deep suspicion in Washington, but seems more likely to avoid an immediate crisis. This does not mean that it provides a long-term solution to the vexed problem of US/Iranian relations – there is certainly going to be a great deal of new thinking necessary for that. The alternative, though, is of a further extension of President Bush's 'war on terror' to a new zone of conflict with every risk of further instability and conflict in the Persian Gulf region.

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>.
