

## International Security Monthly Briefing

August 2004

### A Change of Direction?

---

*Professor Paul Rogers*

The international news media in August were dominated by three weeks of intense fighting in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, but the conflict there formed just one part of a wider problem of insurgency in Iraq which, in turn, was paralleled by events in Israel, Afghanistan, Nepal and Russia.

In Iraq itself, August was the second full month of the Allawi regime, a provisional government installed under the auspices of the United States, and with substantial US influence stretching throughout the ministries and through the regions (refer to June and July briefings). Around 140,000 US troops remain in Iraq, supported by over 20,000 troops from other countries, but their continuing presence is accompanied by intensive efforts to train a large new Iraqi police force, together with border guards, a civil defence force and a small regular army. In addition, there are reported to be many thousands of foreign private security personnel operating throughout the country.

#### **Najaf**

Although the siege and violence in Najaf was just one part of a wider problem of insurgency, its development and the manner of its ending have an enduring significance for the country for a number of reasons. One, undoubtedly, is the manner in which the peace agreement fronted by Grand Ayatollah Sistani has increased his own status and authority, but allied to this is the very extent of the insurgency. This was not restricted to Najaf but affected towns and cities across southern Iraq as well as the large Sadr City district of Baghdad.

Moreover, the real significance of the fighting in Najaf, as with earlier Shi'ite actions there and in many other parts of Iraq earlier in the year, is the remarkable way in which many people within the Iraqi Shi'a majority have moved, over the past year, to fervent opposition to US occupation. At the time of the Saddam Hussein regime's termination, there was a confident assertion in the United States that this would be followed by a sense of liberation. US troop numbers were expected to be halved to 70,000 within six months, reconstruction would proceed apace and a government that was highly sympathetic to the United States would take its place in Baghdad. The US would maintain several substantial permanent military bases in the country and the successful transformation of Iraq would open up a new era of positive influence by the United States, including the restriction of Iranian power, in the world's most important oil-bearing region.

The contrast with actual events is stark. Across much of central and northern Iraq, Sunni insurgents are maintaining a high level of activity against US troops and the Iraqi civil authorities. US forces have suffered close to 1,000 killed since the start of the war, with many thousands of injuries, 1,100 in August alone. Attacks on US forces during August were running at 60 per day, a one-fifth increase on the three months up to the end of June, and kidnappings of foreigners and attacks on the energy infrastructure show no signs of diminishing. A particular additional feature has been a series of attacks on senior Iraqi politicians, civil servants and academics, and persistent attacks on Iraqi police stations and police officers.

It is in addition to this, though, that the Shi'ite rebellions have been so significant, given that there was such confidence in Shi'a support for US forces. Four factors are relevant in analysing the development of this rebellion and its possible further implications. One is that it stems, in part, from the relative marginalisation of many Shi'a communities in major urban areas, a process made more extreme by the lack of employment opportunities and the very slow pace of reconstruction. This is made worse by the frequent use of migrant labour from South Asia, particularly for sensitive transport and construction projects.

A second factor has been the relative success of Shi'a militia in maintaining control of key parts of Najaf in the face of an assault from heavily armed and well-protected US troops. It is true that the US forces were constrained initially from damaging the extensive Valley of Peace cemetery and later from attacking the main shrine, but later during the conflict they were prepared to use heavy ordnance in the cemetery and in the crowded city streets surrounding the shrine, utilising tanks, armoured fighting vehicles, AC-130 gunship, attack helicopters and strike aircraft to cause massive damage in both areas.

Even with these deployments, and with some 3,000 troops facing a much smaller number of Mehdi Army militia, it proved very difficult to make much progress in their aim of defeating Moqtada al-Sadr's forces. Eventually, the US forces were ready and willing to accept the cease-fire facilitated by the return of Ayatollah Sistani from the UK, even though it meant their withdrawal from Najaf in circumstances that allowed many of the surviving militia to slip away, with weapons and munitions dispersed, as well as the survival of Moqtada al-Sadr himself.

What has to be recognised is that these militia were very largely untrained and thoroughly inexperienced in urban guerrilla warfare and were equipped primarily with light arms extending up to light mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. Even so, they were sufficiently determined to be able to sustain substantial casualties in the face of much more massive US firepower and to do so for three weeks.

The third factor is that during the conflict in Najaf, more details emerged of Sunni insurgents supporting the Shi'a militia, including the willingness of experienced paramilitaries from Fallujah and elsewhere being prepared to travel to Najaf and Sadr City to train Shi'a insurgents in urban warfare. Although a relative degree of peace had transpired by the end of August, for the more radical Shi'a militia the end result had been the acquiring of substantial experience in the methods of rebellion and the belief that a victory of sorts had been achieved, in that the overwhelming military power of the US forces had not enabled them to evict the militia. A subsidiary aspect

of this was the perceived failure of the Allawi regime to negotiate a settlement at any stage in the conflict, a failure compounded by a degree of propaganda concerning the supposed progress of US and Iraqi forces that came close, at times, to being incredible.

The fourth and final factor is one that stems partly from the Najaf siege but also from the more general tactics used by US forces in Najaf and elsewhere in Iraq. A pattern has emerged in which US forces are located primarily in secure fortress-like centres and go on patrol in body armour, travelling in Bradley armoured vehicles, armoured Humvees and tanks. There is heavy and frequent use of ground-based firepower but this is now regularly accompanied by the use of attack helicopters, AC-130 gunships and strike aircraft.

The point here is that such use of firepower has become much more general, especially since the conflict at Fallujah in April. That city has since been subject to frequent air-strikes, as have many other towns. Such actions are repeatedly said to be aimed at targets such as “safe houses” that may be occupied by insurgents, but there is abundant evidence of frequent civilian casualties. US authorities frequently deny this, but the regional media such as the Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya satellite news channels provide ample coverage of this “collateral damage”.

The US military command persists that it “doesn’t do body counts” of Iraqi insurgents and civilians, and it is therefore left to Iraqi sources and international non-governmental organisations to try and make reliable assessments. These, in turn, give the lie to the idea that Iraq has experienced a three-week war followed by an uneasy peace. One of the primary sources for civilian casualties, <http://www.iraqbodycount.net>, is now recording civilian deaths at over 12,000 since the war started, with casualty figures running at around 250 deaths per month, even in relatively ‘quiet’ months such as July.

### **Asymmetric Warfare and the US Presidential Election**

At the end of August, the Republican Party met in New York City to confirm George W. Bush as its candidate in the November presidential election. Over the past month or so, the Republican tactics have concentrated on damaging Senator Kerry’s Vietnam War record and on promoting President Bush as the “War President” in the face of a perceived and continuing threat from al-Qaida and its affiliates.

This reached a peak in President Bush’s acceptance speech and the current indications are that it is a workable strategy that is beginning to give him a lead in the election race, with the more vulnerable areas such as the economy and fiscal deficits being relegated to the sidelines if not ignored.

In parallel with the Convention, though, a series of incidents in Russia, Israel, Iraq and Afghanistan at the end of the month all served to cast doubt on the current approaches to the ‘war on terror’. The continued violence in Iraq may currently be having little domestic impact, and the bombings in Afghanistan scarcely get a mention in the mainstream US domestic media. In Israel, too, the double bus bombing in Beersheba has been presented not as a reason to question the vigorous Israeli action

against the Palestinian community but more as proof that even tougher action and the acceleration of the building of the wall are the appropriate responses.

In Russia, too, there remains a tendency to support President Putin in his anti-Chechen actions, even if they appear now to be creating a new generation of thoroughly radicalised Chechen rebels. A spate of violence over the past three months rose to a new peak at the end of August with the destruction of two airliners, a suicide bombing of a Moscow Metro station and the siege of a school at Beslan in North Ossetia, ending in chaotic scenes with the loss of well over 300 lives, many of them children, and injuries to many hundreds more.

In all, Russia suffered close to 500 civilian deaths and far more injuries in a series of actions that, even in Russia, began to lead to doubts about Mr Putin's policies. Such doubts were more firmly expressed in Western Europe, to the anger of the Russian government, and were in contrast to Mr Putin's insistence that the Chechen rebels were linked to al-Qaida and that his forceful actions in Chechnya were therefore a legitimate part of the international war on terror.

Within Republican circles in the United States there is some hesitation in supporting Mr Putin too openly, partly because of a persistent suspicion of Russia that dates back to the Cold War era. At the same time, the horror of the Beslan school siege is such that it serves as a powerful reminder of the threat of terrorism and therefore adds to a sense of threat that is believed to represent an asset to Mr Bush's re-election prospects.

### **Rebirth of the "Present Danger"**

Perhaps most indicative of neoconservative thinking in the United States is the reconstitution of the Committee on the Present Danger, the third time that its supporters have seen the need for such a movement. The Committee was formed in the United States in the early 1950s and did much to convince Americans of the dangers of the Soviet threat. It receded into the background in the 1960s and early 1970s but was brought back to activity in the last few years of the 1970s during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

Along with groups such as High Frontier and the Heritage Foundation, the Committee on the Present Danger played a major role in elevating the Soviet threat to a key issue in the 1980 presidential election, aided by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis. Ronald Reagan formed an administration in 1981 that involved many members of the Committee in security-related posts, there was a substantial increase in defence budgets and a more aggressive attitude to the Soviet Union. When the Cold War finally ended, the Committee on the Present Danger once again receded into the shadows.

Now it has been reconstituted, involving a wide range of neoconservative and allied figures, many of them involved in the late 1970s incarnation. In its literature, the Committee has replaced the Soviet menace with an almost imperceptible change to the menace of Islamic fundamentalism, arguing that this is the greatest threat facing the United States and calling for greater defence spending and vigorous actions wherever required.

It is probable that the Committee has been reconstituted now in the light of a possible Kerry victory in the November election. Given the attitude of the Bush administration and its robust pursuit of al-Qaida and the 'axis of evil', it is not easy to see the need for the Committee should President Bush be re-elected. A Kerry victory would be another matter, and there may well be a felt need to have the necessary lobbying groups ready to ensure a thorough opposition to any liberalisation by a Kerry administration of the pursuit of rogue states and terrorists.

### **A Change of Direction?**

During the course of August, US forces were unable to take control of Najaf and experienced a continuing insurgency in many parts of Iraq, while in Afghanistan, bombings and other forms of violence continued. Israel's apparent control of the Palestinian intifada was called into question by the Beersheba bombings and Russia experienced substantial violence, not least in response to its actions in Chechnya. Such parallel problems might be expected to call into question the overall policies currently being pursued in Israel, Russia and the United States, but there seems little sign of that, even if governmental and public opinion in Europe is far more circumspect.

With the United States being the lead actor in this 'war on terror', the signs of any change are minimal. A second term for President Bush might possibly involve some reconsideration but it seems unlikely, and the renewed Committee on the Present Danger, in concert with other policy groups, will argue forcefully against any change in policy by a Kerry administration. For now, the conclusion has to be that any rethinking of strategy and exploration of less militaristic approaches is unlikely, even given the difficulties experienced in August. Ultimately, new approaches may be forthcoming from Western Europe and elsewhere, but they are unlikely to make much headway for many months to come.

---

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>.

---