

## International Security Monthly Briefing

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### Iraq and a Wider War

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Much of the media emphasis on Iraq during August was concerned with the intense fighting in Najaf that was finally ended by a ceasefire agreement aided by Grand Ayatollah Sistani. It involved the withdrawal of Moqtada al-Sadr's militia but also of US military forces. Security was turned over to Iraqi police and paramilitary units and a degree of calm returned to the city and neighbouring districts. Elsewhere in Iraq the insurgency continued and even intensified, with repeated bombings, attacks on US and Iraqi units and multiple kidnappings. By the end of the month, substantial parts of Baghdad as well as Fallujah and a number of other towns and cities were effectively under the control of insurgents.

The early part of September was marked by the tragic end to the siege of a school in Beslan, the return of suicide bombings in Israel, and further violence in Afghanistan, all of this in addition to the endemic problems in Iraq itself. While most of these instances of violence appeared to have little effect on the US presidential election campaign, at the end of the month some impact was felt, although this seemed unlikely to damage President Bush's prospects sufficiently to hinder his re-election.

#### **Russia and Israel**

The response of the Putin government to the Beslan school siege was to seek international support for the view that the Chechen rebellion should be seen as part of the 'war on terror', while rejecting international criticism of any hard-line actions that the Russian authorities might take in response. Although there was little independent evidence, Russian government sources claimed that some of those taking over the school were Islamic radicals from other countries. There was broad acceptance within the Bush administration that Chechnya could be seen in this wider context, but European Union sources took a different view, questioning Russian responses much to the annoyance of the Russian authorities.

Israel, too, has worked intently to portray the Palestinian uprising as part of its own 'war on terror' and Israeli government representatives repeated this view following a new wave of suicide bombings early in September, the first major incidents for several months. Here again the Bush administration was sympathetic, indeed far more so than in relation to the Russian/Chechen conflict, and here again, the most common view from European Union sources was to parallel condemnation of the suicide bombings with criticism of aspects of Israeli policies. This was directed especially at the further building of settlements and the use of considerable force in Gaza.

In both cases, though, the hard-line Russian and Israeli attitudes were seen across much of the Arab world as further evidence of western attempts to exert control over the Islamic world. Throughout the month, as in many previous months, there was detailed reporting of civilian casualties in the occupied territories, and the extent of the earlier destruction by Russian forces in Chechnya was well-known. In such a way, there was a clear portrayal of a religion and culture under siege, even before the continuing violence in Iraq was factored in.

### **Afghanistan and Pakistan**

In Afghanistan, some progress has been made towards holding presidential elections, but this is against a pattern of insecurity stemming from two separate factors. One is the continuing power of warlords in many parts of the country, in spite of the efforts of the Karzai administration to bring some areas of warlord control under central government authority. The other is the continuing low-level insurgency in parts of eastern and southern Afghanistan as a result of a resurgence of Taliban activity.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has aided the Afghan authorities in maintaining a degree of control in Kabul and in some other cities and some major transport routes, but even the current expansion takes it to less than 10,000 troops, barely a third of what is believed by independent analysts to be required. ISAF is now effectively a NATO operation, yet NATO has had difficulty in getting member states to provide the necessary forces.

Even in areas away from the Taliban-inspired insurgency, there are persistent attacks on government forces and foreign security personnel. At the end of August, the Kabul offices of a US security company, Dyncorp, were bombed killing seven people, and during September there was an assassination attempt on Vice President Nematullah Shahrani and a suspected attempt against Mr Karzai himself.

There have also been further violent incidents between US forces and Taliban units. The counter-insurgency force in Afghanistan now numbers close to 20,000, the great majority being drawn from the US armed forces. This strong military presence comes nearly three years after the start of the war in Afghanistan, whereas the original expectation had been a rapid withdrawal of US forces by late 2002, with the main presence being reduced to relatively small forces located at the Bagram and Kandahar bases. Although on a smaller scale than Iraq, the end result is that US forces seem likely to be involved in combat in Afghanistan for an indefinite period.

In this context, the security situation in Pakistan remains a key factor in the region. President Musharraf has deployed Pakistani Army units in the border regions close to Afghanistan for much of the year. They have succeeded in countering some militias operating across the border but the successes, from Washington's perspective, have been limited. Musharraf therefore remains under pressure from the United States, but many of the radical groups that support anti-American actions in Afghanistan are broadly allied to those groups that continue to put pressure on Indian forces in disputed Kashmir.

Moreover, anti-American sentiments remain high in much of Pakistan and there have been recent assassination attempts against an army general and the Prime Minister

designate. At the same time, the Congress Party's victory in the Indian general election means that there is greater scope for negotiations over Kashmir and this allows the Musharraf administration a certain breathing space. It is even possible that a sustained easing of the tensions with India could strengthen Musharraf's position against radical elements in Pakistan itself.

The problem, though, is that such elements are fully aware of this and may make serious attempts to destabilise the government, most likely through further assassination attempts. One key factor here is the impact of US military actions in Iraq and of Israeli military actions in Gaza. In both cases, the continual civilian deaths and injuries are being widely reported across the region, producing difficulties for Musharraf and other pro-western governments that appear entirely unrecognised in Washington.

### **Insurgency and Counteraction in Iraq**

Eighteen months into the Iraq War is an appropriate time to reflect on original intentions and outcomes. When the United States led a coalition to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime last year, there was an expectation that this could form the centrepiece of a Greater Middle East Initiative that would ensure the security of Gulf oil supplies and, separately, of the State of Israel. It was expected that the regime would fall quickly and that coalition forces would be widely welcomed as liberators. Within a few months it would be possible to withdraw most of the military forces and to oversee the development of a client government that would be friendly to US interests.

A key part of the plan would be the building of a number of permanent military bases, some of them with strategic locations close to the main northern and southern oilfields but with another base positioned to ensure the security of new oilfields that might be developed in the western desert region of Iraq. In parallel with this, Iraq would develop as a vigorous free market economy with a minimum of constraints and regulations, and with its plentiful oil resources forming a base for western investment.

The end result would be a pro-western free market Iraq with a continuing US military presence. In such circumstances, Iran's position would be made more difficult, with US naval forces present in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and land and air forces based in Iraq and in western Gulf states such as Kuwait and Qatar. Saudi Arabia would become less significant in geopolitical terms, in spite of its massive oil reserves, and any future instability there would be of less importance, given US influence in Iraq.

In the past eighteen months this vision has been very largely lost. The rapid move to a free market has resulted in continuing unemployment and marginalisation for millions of Iraqis, helping to fuel the insurgency, and the political transition is proving deeply problematic. Most important of all, a full scale insurgency has evolved that is severely stretching US forces and killing hundreds of Iraqis each month. The permanent US bases are certainly being built but the prospects for a stable pro-western Iraq are minimal. Instead, there is little prospect of withdrawing the occupying forces, and US military planners see the need for well over 100,000 troops to remain in Iraq for some

years. More generally, anti-Americanism has increased markedly across the Arab world and beyond, with this aiding recruitment into al-Qaida and its affiliated groups.

If the original plan for Iraq is therefore defunct, is it possible to discern the current strategy and, if so, are there further choices in the event of failure? For the present, it is fair to say that the United States is pursuing a counter-insurgency war while trying to minimise its own casualties. At the same time, it is seeking to increase the availability of Iraqi police, paramilitary and military forces as rapidly as possible. The anticipated free market is scarcely emerging, given that many of the reconstruction programmes remain at a standstill. Even so, there appears to be a hope that the insurgency can be controlled sufficiently to allow some elections in January and that, eventually, a degree of stability will be achieved.

In the short term of the next three months, US forces will continue to use their advantages in firepower to damage insurgent forces in cities such as Ramadi, Samarra and Fallujah, but there is little evidence that these actions are having an impact on the insurgency. In September, 81 US soldiers were killed, one of the worst casualty rates since the war started, and US forces are currently experiencing over 80 attacks a day. Meanwhile, the large numbers of civilian casualties are further stimulating opposition to the US occupation, with the Allawi regime also unpopular in that it is seen as collaborating with a foreign occupying force.

The experience to date in Iraq is that responding to the problems of insurgency with substantial military force is consistently counterproductive. Such methods were tried in the summer months of 2003 and again later in the year, and they were repeated on a larger scale in April of this year. On each occasion the insurgency intensified, and it is highly likely that this will be the result of the current operations in Samarra, Fallujah, Sadr City and elsewhere. The implications are that the insurgency may not be controllable using the methods and tactics currently available to the United States.

Is there a further option that could be developed? From what little evidence is currently available, an escalating and uncontrollable insurgency could lead to one of two choices for the United States. The first would be to withdraw entirely, but this would be politically unthinkable, at least for the Bush administration, given the importance of Iraq and its oil resources to current US policy in the Middle East. The second would be to withdraw almost entirely from the centres of population, falling back on the permanent bases being established close to the major oil fields. Even such a limited development would have been unthinkable a few months ago, but circumstances in Iraq do now make it a possible outcome.

Even then, though, the end result would be a substantial US military presence in key parts of Iraq. It might minimise US casualties while allowing considerable influence to be maintained in Iraq, but it would, in due course, act as a magnet for paramilitaries, including those linked to al-Qaida, in their opposition to the US presence in the region.

## **Iran**

Although the United States is hugely preoccupied in Iraq, with a worsening insurgency and rising casualty rates among its own troops, relations between the US

and Iran remain deeply problematic. Iran is now reluctant to open up its nuclear facilities to IAEA inspection at the level required by the United States, and this is fuelling suspicions in Washington that a nascent nuclear weapons programme is being established. Recent reports from within Iran indicate that a new class of ballistic missiles is being developed and possibly deployed that could have a range to cover much of the region.

From an Iranian perspective, with US forces on three sides of its territory, some kind of deterrent force may be a major aspect of its current security policy, but the effect in Washington is to increase pressure for pre-emptive action, even at a time of intense commitments in Iraq. In such circumstances, such pre-emptive action, involving conventional air attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities, could come much earlier than many analysts expect. It could even happen before next month's US presidential election.

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Professor Rogers' monthly briefings from May 2003 – April 2004 are published, along with new analysis and discussion, in the Oxford Research Group international security report for 2004, *'Iraq and the War on Terror'*. Copies can be ordered from ORG at £7.99 plus postage. More information is available from <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/books/iraqandwaronterror.htm>.

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