

## International Security Monthly Briefing

October 2004

### Iraq, al-Qaida and a Renewed Caliphate

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#### The Iraq Insurgency

During the course of October, the insurgency in Iraq was maintained at a high level, with scores of attacks each day on US troops and also on Iraqi government facilities and security forces. The police and new Iraqi defence forces experienced particularly high numbers of casualties but there was persistent and strong use of force by US troops and strike aircraft, with the city of Fallujah bombed repeatedly during the month.

At different times, US forces attempted to control insurgents in the cities of Ramadi and Samarra, with systematic attacks in Samarra giving rise to claims that the city had been returned fully to Iraqi government control. In practice, such control was short-lived, with a resurgence of paramilitary activity during the course of the month. Even so, towards the end of October, there were indications that US military planners were putting together a large force of Marines to engage in a major assault on Fallujah. This was considered to be the key city for the insurgency and the presumption was that if resistance in Fallujah could be overcome, then the insurgency would be hindered sufficiently for elections to go ahead in January.

Apparently because of a shortage of combat troops, the US requested British military support in areas close to Baghdad, the effect of this being to link British forces closely, if indirectly, to the anticipated attack on Fallujah.

The plans for an assault on Fallujah were developed in the context of substantial further US casualties during October. During the month another 65 US troops were killed, bringing the figure for the three months to the end of October to 211. One key aspect of this is that these deaths come in an insurgency that has been developing for eighteen months. During that time the US military has greatly increased the levels of protection available to its troops. Tactics and equipment have undergone radical changes and there have been persistent efforts to utilise the experience of the Israeli Defence Forces in the occupied territories.

Moreover, the US forces are all too ready to use substantial firepower, and many of the troops are now experienced in urban guerrilla warfare, being into their second term of deployment in Iraq. In spite of all this, the casualty levels remain high, giving some indication of the problems now being faced in Iraq at a time when there are deep suspicions that insurgents have successfully infiltrated elements of the new Iraqi security forces.

## Casualties of War

Towards the end of October new information emerged relating to the level of civilian casualties in Iraq since the war started, and this may now throw light on the underlying reasons for the persistence, and indeed the intensification, of the insurgency.

A feature of the coalition operations throughout the first eighteen months of the Iraq War has been the deep reluctance to give any estimates of civilian casualties – as General Franks put it “we don’t do body counts”. Instead, it has been left to non-governmental organisations such as Iraq Body Count (IBC) together with the partial release of information from the Iraq Ministry of Health, to give some indication of the human costs of the war.

IBC has provided detailed and very careful estimates of civilian deaths and injuries, using multiple press sources to verify each record of casualties. It has recorded around 15,000 deaths since the onset of the war in March 2003, with at least one third of those deaths being caused since the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Separate assessments from the Iraqi Ministry of Health were published during the middle part of 2004, and these confirmed a continuing cost to civilians as the insurgency developed. In the 22 weeks to 6 September, they recorded 3,040 Iraqis killed, and a separate *New York Times* estimate for the week up to 17 October, gained from multiple sources including hospital and mortuary sources, was of 208 Iraqis killed. Ministry of Health and the *New York Times* figures would seem to point to an annual loss of life of over 7,000 civilians, and, on the basis of experience in other conflicts, this would mean up to 20,000 people injured.

At the end of October, and just before the US presidential election, estimates from an entirely new source suggested that the civilian death toll in Iraq might be very much higher than has previously been realised. In a detailed and peer-reviewed paper in the medical journal *The Lancet*, it was concluded that the civilian death toll may be as high as 100,000.

The work was carried out by a team of public health specialists at a leading US university, Johns Hopkins, in Baltimore, working with Iraqi doctors and other medical specialists. Operating under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, teams of researchers interviewed substantial numbers of Iraqis from numerous sites across Iraq designed to be as representative as possible. Using sample sizes very much larger than opinion polling, they were able to determine that the risk of violent death has risen more than 50-fold since the start of the occupation and infant mortality has almost doubled.

Some of the increases in death rates have been due to weakened medical facilities, transport difficulties and wide-ranging disruptions, but much of the greatly increased death rate was directly due to coalition military actions. Furthermore, many of the extrapolations were done in a conservative manner – the results for Fallujah, for example, were not included because of the specifically high death toll there resulting from the coalition offensive last April.

The authors of the paper do not specifically claim a civilian death toll of 100,000; they say that it is a reasonable assessment based on their extensive work. Even if remotely accurate it suggests that coalition air and ground attacks have had a much greater impact on civilian populations than has previously been realised. At the very least, the paper supports the idea that other estimates based directly on individually recorded and published deaths may be markedly conservative in their results.

Even if an assumption is made that the *Lancet* paper is overestimating the casualties, and that they are closer to other figures of around 15,000, this still means a loss of life and of serious injury affecting close to 50,000 people, which in turn represents about 1 in 500 of the entire Iraqi population.

This suggests that a very large proportion, perhaps even a majority of the entire population of the country, is likely to have had family or neighbourhood experience of death or serious injury due to coalition action. If the Johns Hopkins study is even remotely accurate, the impact is very much higher. This would, at the very least, help explain the developing opposition to the coalition forces and the increasing perception of them as occupiers. It would also explain the widespread reality of tacit if not open support for the insurgency.

It further follows that if the United States and its coalition partners actually increase the intensity of attacks on cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Samarra, as well as parts of Baghdad itself, then the increased civilian casualties that will result will be likely to further intensify opposition to the coalition.

### **The Bin Laden Video**

Another substantial development at the end of the October, just days before the US presidential election, was the release of a video tape of the al-Qaida leader, Osama bin Laden. At first sight this may simply be seen as an attempt to influence the US election, presumably to aid George Bush in his re-election contest. Even though bin Laden might well prefer a Bush second term, not least because a Christian fundamentalist in the White House helps him in the short term, it is unlikely that this was the main reason. Instead, the message is more probably directed at four linked audiences outside the United States, with the timing, style and content all relevant to achieving certain aims.

In terms of timing, four days before the US election could hardly be better, ensuring that the tape received prime-time coverage around the world. Moreover, with all of the attention on the US election, releasing this tape at such a time ensured that it remained in the media for several days rather than receding within a few hours.

The style of the message is different to earlier examples in the sense that it presents bin Laden as a figure seeking to exude authority. The lectern, the dress and the style all serve to present the image of a figurehead – not a military leader but more someone who is developing a long-term international role, even if he himself does not survive much longer. In part, this latest message may be intended for posterity.

As to the message, its most significant aspect is the reference to Lebanon and 1982. In June of that year, the Israeli defence minister, Ariel Sharon, launched *Operation Peace*

*for Galilee*. The stated aim was to eliminate the capacity of Palestinian militias to launch short-range unguided Katyusha rockets at targets in Galilee, but the real aim was to occupy most of Southern Lebanon up to Beirut, destroying the PLO leadership then entrenched in the western part of the city, and countering the Syrian presence in much of central Lebanon.

The well-equipped Israeli forces reached Beirut but faced much stronger opposition from Palestinian militia, resulting in a bitter siege of West Beirut that lasted many weeks. Israeli artillery and strike aircraft used repeated bombardments to attempt to dislodge the militia, with close to 20,000 people dying during the siege, at least half of them civilians.

Later that year, Israeli military forces allowed Lebanese Christian Phalange militia to massacre Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps. This increased the existing bitter divisions in Israeli society over the purpose and conduct of the war, and resulted in the temporary demotion of Sharon. More generally, though, the Israeli Defence Forces found it impossible to maintain control of Southern Lebanon in the face of increasing Hezbollah militia activity and withdrew from most of the territory by 1985.

Bin Laden's reference to Lebanon recalls for Arab audiences the repeated Israeli attacks on West Beirut's high rise blocks of apartments, the "towers", and it also reminds many of them of the subsequent 'defeat' of Israeli military forces but also of Sharon's role in the entire operation. Moreover, the Israeli operation in 1982 was presumed across much of the Middle East to be backed by the United States, the US was one of the states subsequently putting in peace-enforcing troops, was responsible for actions against radical Lebanese militia, including the shelling of towns and villages, and suffered a huge loss in the killing of 241 US Marines in a suicide bomb attack at Beirut Airport in October 1983.

Bin Laden therefore puts together the claim for US involvement in Israeli expansion into Lebanon, Israeli attacks on "Arab towers" and the role of Ariel Sharon, but also the withdrawal of the Israelis from much of Lebanon and of the US from that same country. It is a message designed to appeal to Palestinians and to the Shi'a communities with their links to Hezbollah, both communities that have offered less than full support for al-Qaida.

In addition, two more general audiences are the focus for the message. One is the convinced supporters of al-Qaida and its many associates – for them the message is that Osama bin Laden is still there, and can claim to be a figure of increased authority. The other is for a much wider Arab and Islamic audience and demonstrates that he has the power to dominate the world's media and have a direct impact on the election of the President of the world's most powerful state.

### **Iraq and a New Caliphate**

Bin Laden's concentration on Israel and the United States and their activities in Lebanon in 1982 and his claim that these actions were his original motivation is almost certainly an exercise in hindsight. It is chosen now to remind his audience that, in his analysis, the early 1980s represented a period in which Islam was clearly under attack

from a combination of the United States and Israel, just as he will now justify al-Qaida and its affiliates because of Israel's hard-line control of the Palestinians and of American involvement in Iraq.

It is here that the casualty levels connect. In Iraq, many thousands of civilians have been killed, with hundreds dying every month. While this is happening, Israel is using persistent and massive force to control the Palestinian *intifada*. According to the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, 159 Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip in October, with 50 of them civilians including children.

Osama bin Laden's attempts to embrace the Palestinian cause may be relatively recent, and certainly undesired by most Palestinians, but he has sought to make this one of his three short-term aims, along with the dissolution of the House of Saud as the unacceptably corrupt keeper of the Two Holy Places, and the expulsion of western forces from the Middle East.

It is the long-term aim of bin Laden and al-Qaida that is actually more significant and has a particular relevance to Iraq. Bin Laden and his associates have consistently denigrated the elitism and wealth of existing regimes across the Middle East, just as he denigrates the perceived elites in the United States. In his recent video he describes the United States as "similar to regimes in our countries, half of which are governed by the military and the other half of which are governed by the sons of kings and presidents; and we have long experience with them." He continues: "In both categories, you find many who are characterised by hubris, arrogance, greed, and unlawful acquisition of money". (BBC translation)

For the al-Qaida leadership there is the long-term aim of destroying such regimes, initially in the Islamic world, and replacing them with acceptable 'pure' Islamic governance. What form this would take, and whether it would relate to current state boundaries is less than clear, but there is sense of the need to re-establish a caliphate\* in the Middle East, perhaps as a prelude to a wider process of conversion across the world.

Over 1,400 years there have been periods of notable caliphates, although many were of more symbolic importance than their actual power at the time. Even the longest-lasting caliphate, the Abbasids, that lasted for 500 years from 749 CE, involved long periods of Turkish, Persian or other rule. Two things, though, make the Abbasid Caliphate significant in the current era. One is that it certainly coincided with the most notable period of Arab civilisation, including the flowering of mathematics, the sciences, the arts and architecture, mostly at a time when Western Europe was barely struggling out of the Dark Ages and long before the colonisation of North America.

The second factor is that for most of those five centuries, the Abbasid Caliphate was centred on what was then the hugely important city of Baghdad. This is now seen to be occupied by western forces, and can so easily be represented as a Christian/Zionist axis of control in the heart of the Islamic world.

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\* Caliphate: the leadership acting in Muhammad's place after his death.

Much of this may be perception and much of it may be symbolism. Moreover, al-Qaida and its associates had little or no connections with the largely secular Saddam Hussein prior to last year, even if he did seek to embrace Islam at the end of his rule. Until a little over a year ago, the al-Qaida group was far more concerned with Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other Islamic countries across the world. Iraq was scarcely on the radar until the Bush administration began the operation to terminate the regime and bring Iraq into the western fold.

Analysts currently speak of the value to al-Qaida of the US occupation of Iraq. It provides the insurgents and foreign paramilitaries in Iraq with well over 100,000 'targets' – in a real sense America has come to them. But the value goes far beyond that. What the occupation of Iraq is beginning to do is to provide al-Qaida and bin Laden with a whole new focus on what they may well have expected to be many decades of conflict to 'purify' Islam.

For them, the foreign occupation of Iraq, the seat of the most distinguished caliphate in early Islamic history, is an unexpected but quite remarkable bonus. It is one that they may see playing to their advantage not just in the coming months or years but over a decade or more, an aspect of the occupation of Iraq that is almost entirely unrecognised in London, let alone Washington.

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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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