

International Security Monthly Briefing - December 2004

## Towards the Third Year of War

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In the immediate aftermath of the US assault on the city of Fallujah in early November, there was a belief in many Republican circles in Washington that the assault was being successful in destroying perhaps the key centre of opposition to the US military presence in Iraq. The result would be a curbing of the entire insurgency, enabling elections to proceed with little hindrance at the end of January.

In analysing the events of that month, the previous briefing in this series (November 2004) suggested that the contrast between those who took such a view and others who saw little change, would provide “the clearest indication of prospects for decreased violence and increased security in Iraq in the coming months.”

### Elections and Insurgency

A month later, the early indications are that the insurgency is continuing and may even be deepening. This is not to say that the elections will not take place – they almost certainly will – but that they may make little difference to the levels of insecurity across much of the country.

In a sense, the elections will be just one further marker in a long-term pattern in which particular events have been expected to lead to improvements. The original occupation of Iraq in April 2003 was expected to be a process of liberation, but an insurgency began to develop within days of the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime. Three months later, the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein in Mosul was expected to severely limit opposition, yet the following months saw a further escalation of violence, not least with the attacks on the UN and Red Cross buildings in Baghdad.

Towards the end of the year, US military sources were saying that the insurgency was essentially controlled by a handful of extended families, that they had been identified and were being watched and that their activities would be progressively controlled. Then, in December, Saddam Hussein was himself captured amid scenes of confident expectations of the insurgency’s demise. Once again, this view was proved wrong, with April 2004 being one of the most violent months since the war began.

Even so, the handover of power to the Allawi regime at the end of June was expected to undermine the opposition to US occupation, but this, too, proved illusory, leading to widespread violence in August that included protracted fighting in Najaf. Meanwhile hundreds of Iraqi civilians were being killed each month, and the insurgents themselves placed increased emphasis on targeting Iraqi police and national guard units as well as US military units and civilian contractors. It was in this context that, towards the end of the year, the assault on Fallujah was both prepared and implemented.

## US Casualties

Close to two months after the start of the assault on the city, a tentative analysis can be made of its effects. The first point to make is that the last six months of 2004 was the worst such period for US casualties since the war began. 503 soldiers were killed through combat or non-combat injuries compared with 401 in the first six months of the year. This may be explained, in part, by the increased intensity of US military action, especially in Fallujah, but the month after that assault, December, saw 75 US soldiers killed, one of the highest monthly casualty rates since the start of the war.

In some parts of the country, US military sources reported a decrease in the rate of attacks during December, down to about 60 a day compared with a rate of well over 100 during November. At the same time, three trends were indicative of the changing nature of the insurgency. One was a further increase in the use of suicide bombings, a form of insurgency that is very difficult to counter, and a second was the increased number of attacks against Iraqi units, with perhaps less attention given to the heavily protected and well-armed US forces.

The third trend, though, was towards better intelligence being available to the insurgents. This was demonstrated most powerfully by the attack on a US base near Mosul in late December, where insurgents penetrated into the mess tent used by US soldiers and contractors, detonating a bomb with devastating effect.

## Insurgent Capabilities

While there may be strong support for elections in the Kurdish north-east of Iraq and in many of the largely Shi'a areas, it is also clear that the insurgency is deeply embedded in much of the country and is certainly not limited to the so-called "Sunni triangle" north of Baghdad. Where US forces stage major operations in cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Samarra, there may be a temporary decrease in insurgent activity there, but in some of the areas of operation the insurgents regroup and become active once more, or else they move their operations elsewhere. This was most apparent in the immediate aftermath of the Fallujah assault where there was a sudden burst of insurgent activity in Mosul, resulting in most of the Iraqi police force leaving their posts in the face of persistent attacks.

Perhaps the most remarkable indication of the intensity of the insurgency came in an assessment from the head of the Iraqi intelligence service within the Allawi regime, General Shahwani, right at the end of 2004. He assessed the total strength of the insurgency at around 40,000 active paramilitaries backed by up to 160,000 active supporters willing to provide intelligence, shelter and logistics support and even engage, on occasions in attacks.

This contrasts with US estimates given in October of 5,000 to 20,000 full-time or part-time insurgents, but Shahwani's figures were not immediately countered by US sources. It is in even sharper contrast to the belief, expressed a year earlier, that the insurgency was limited to those few extended families – "remnants" of the old regime.

Other evidence of the depth of the security problem comes from recently released figures for the number of people being held in detention by US and British forces. Although Iraq is theoretically under the control of the government of Mr Allawi, there had been virtually no decrease in the number of detainees held by occupation forces. These are currently held in three major locations, Abu Ghraib near Baghdad, Camp Bucca near the Kuwait border and the British-controlled Al-Shuaiba base near Basra. Close to 10,000 people are in detention, and almost all are there because of suspected participation in the insurgency.

Of this total, only 350 are foreigners. It is possible that some foreign detainees have been removed to other locations in the Gulf region or even further away, but these figures do support the information available from other sources that only about 1 in 20 of all the insurgents are non-Iraqis. Moreover, the foreign paramilitaries active in Iraq do not seem to come especially from either of the two countries that US sources claim to be undermining Iraqi security – Iran and Syria. There are currently reported to be only 22 Iranians in detention, and the Syrians being held are outnumbered by nationals of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

### Counterinsurgency Experience

Although the parallels are far from appropriate in every sense, in terms of counter-insurgency operations it is instructive to compare the current situation in Iraq with other examples. In conventional military operations, it is usually considered necessary for attackers to outnumber defenders by a ratio of about 3:1. This is not always the case and is dependent on many other issues, not least the extent of defence support and the military capabilities of both sides.

In insurgency and counterinsurgency operations, it is often the case that a ratio of 10:1 is considered necessary in order to suppress an insurgency. Northern Ireland in the 1970s was a complex insurgency in an even more complex political environment, but it is worth recalling that the total paramilitary strength of the Provisional IRA was never more than a few hundred, albeit supported by many thousands more and enjoying widespread if disjointed community support. Throughout that decade, the UK Government had forces drawn from the British Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and other units numbering well over 20,000 – yet it was unable to control the Provisional IRA which eventually was even able to engage in economic targeting in Britain in the early 1990s to severe political effect.

Other insurgencies may, on occasions, have other effects, but the reality is that a substantial minority of the population of central Iraq now supports the insurgents, their levels of activity are intense, and they show no signs whatsoever of any decrease in their capabilities.

### The Second Bush Administration

How does the security situation in Iraq relate to the formation of the second Bush administration? In Washington, that administration is now taking shape, as discussed in last month's assessment, and three features are relevant. One is the retirement of Colin Powell as Secretary of State, removing one of the relatively moderate and cautious senior figures in the administration. A second is the manner in which new

figures taking on more formal cabinet roles are drawn very heavily from White House insiders. This goes well beyond Condoleezza Rice at the State Department and amounts to a consolidation in positions of authority of those most trusted by President Bush.

A third is less clear-cut at present but relates back to the neoconservative vision of a New American Century. What appears to be happening is that this movement has got a substantial new lease of life following President Bush's re-election success and, with it, a determination to consolidate its world-view in order to ensure that it survives long after George W Bush has retired to Crawford, Texas.

Since the New American Century project is very much a matter of world vision, the main emphasis is on foreign policy and international security, and within this context the Middle East remains central. Whatever the major problems now evident in Iraq, the region retains its importance, even if that requires more radical policies than have so far been implemented. Two examples are the attitude towards Syria and the question of terrorism detainees.

Within neoconservative circles, much of the blame for the continuing problems in Iraq is being aimed at Iran and Syria. Even though the evidence indicates that their actual influence in the Iraq insurgency is low level, both are being singled out for strong criticism. Action against Iran is problematic, given the more positive attitudes of European powers and the growing economic links between Iran and China, but Syria is certainly being singled out for potential pressure in the coming months, quite possibly extending even to limited military action.

On the matter of detainees, the hard-line nature of the administration is illustrated by an interagency review that is now under way in Washington over the long-term future of prisoners being held at Guantanamo and elsewhere. This even goes so far as to include plans for indefinite detention that would apply to those detainees whom the administration does not want to release but is unwilling to bring to trial. These could be potentially lifetime detentions and could involve two options. One would involve the building of a new 200-place facility, provisionally termed "Camp 6", for long-term detention under US military authority. The other would be to house detainees in US-built prisons in their own countries, such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan. In all cases, detainees would not have the status of prisoner of war and would lack legal redress.

These two examples – the possibility of pre-emptive military action against Syria, and the new approach to indefinite detention without trial – are both indications of the more hard-line policies now being countenanced in Washington. It is possible that both will be countered by the vigour of domestic political debate, but there is little sign of that so far. That, at least, is an early indication that the neoconservative outlook so prominent in Washington is not a passing fad but something that is far more deep-seated within the evolution of the US political system.

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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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