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## The Iraq Impasse

*Professor Paul Rogers*

The termination of the Saddam Hussein regime came after a brief but bitter three week conflict in March and April 2003, with this phase of the war ending with the American occupation of Baghdad and the disappearance of most of the members of the old regime. One of the most remarkable features of the final days of the regime was the behaviour of the Information Minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, ever ready to report to the journalists in Baghdad that the regime was resisting the occupation to great effect.

Even when US forces were in the heart of Baghdad, he insisted that their progress was slow and that they were suffering great casualties, so much so that he was dubbed “Comical Ali”. Mr al-Sahhaf disappeared shortly after the US occupation of Baghdad but surfaced three months later to give an interview for the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya TV station, claiming to have been detained in Baghdad and then released by US forces, a claim denied by the US authorities.

At the height of the fighting in Baghdad, one of Mr al-Sahhaf’s final claims was to the effect that “we will bury you” – that a US occupation of Iraq would lead to a bitter conflict that would be immensely costly to US forces. Like almost all his other statements this was dismissed out of hand and, only three weeks after it was made, President Bush was able to declare military operations over, in his speech on the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* made in front of a “mission accomplished” banner.

During those first three weeks of the war, Mr al-Sahhaf became a figure of fun, although there were already anomalies that suggested that regime termination would not mark the end of the conflict. Although there was intense fighting between US forces and Republican Guard units south of Baghdad and around the city’s international airport, one of the remarkable features of the conflict was the almost total absence of Saddam Hussein’s elite forces, including the Special Republican Guard, some commando units and the various military forces under the control of the security and intelligence agencies. There had been an assumption before the start of the war that these would be the key forces defending Baghdad and the heart of the regime. In the event they were nowhere to be seen as the regime collapsed, having apparently melted away with weapons largely intact. While most of Mr al-Sahhaf’s comments were wild exaggerations, it is possible that he was aware of this development and knew that a guerrilla war was planned. Certainly it is one element of all his comments that now strikes a chord two years later and with a war continuing with renewed intensity.

Because the initial termination of the Saddam Hussein regime was so rapid, there was an immediate tendency to describe the conflict in Iraq as a three-week war followed by a period of instability and insurgency. In this interpretation, the earlier 1991 war

was a six-week conflict to evict the Iraqis from Kuwait and the 2003 war took half that time to terminate the regime or “finish the job”. This representation of events was made more viable by the fact that it took several weeks after the fall of the regime for the insurgency to develop – in the months of May and June 2003, the US forces lost only 67 troops, one of the lowest figures for any such period since the onset of the conflict. At the same time, such an interpretation is deeply misleading in that a short war followed by a difficult peace implies that the problems in Iraq are essentially short-term. A much stronger argument can be made for the idea that the initial three-week period marked the start of a prolonged conflict that is now in its third year. In such a context, some of Mr al-Sahhaf’s comments are strangely prescient.

Even so, in the two years since the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime, there have been many occasions when the US military and political authorities have declared the insurgency to be in retreat. These have included the period around the killing of Qusay and Uday Hussein in July 2003, the capture of Saddam Hussein himself in December of that year, the establishment of Mr Allawi’s interim administration the following June and the focus on Fallujah as the centre of insurgency last November. In every case, the optimism was short-lived, yet it surfaced again at the time of the elections in January.

In an earlier analysis in this series (January) the three-month period after the elections, from February to April, was thought to be a key period for understanding whether the insurgency would continue to develop or whether the political process would undermine support for the insurgents. At the end of that three months, the conclusion has to be broadly pessimistic, indeed the last week of April was marked by a period of sustained violence, and the previous month saw some 250 members of the Iraqi police and security forces, including many new recruits, killed by insurgents.

There was certainly a brief lull in the insurgency in the immediate aftermath of the January elections, although hindsight suggests that this was largely due to the limitations on insurgent movements through an intense period of US military control around the time of the elections, a degree of control that simply could not be maintained for any length of time, given the size of the occupation forces. Furthermore, it has become clear that the insurgents themselves have changed their tactics to concentrate primarily on the Iraqi security forces.

Attacks on US forces certainly continue, and now include occasional major assaults on US bases, sometimes involving more than 50 insurgents in single operations. The US casualties remain high – during the course of March and April, US forces lost 88 people killed and, in the 8-week period to 26 April, nearly 950 US troops were wounded, 255 of them seriously. At the same time, it is the Iraqi security and police forces that are bearing the brunt of the insurgency, and in substantial parts of Iraq, such forces have withdrawn to the relative safety of bases that are often outside the towns and cities that they are meant to control.

There are several factors that help to explain the continuing development of the insurgency and these need to be explored to get some indication of probable trends in the coming months. One key issue is the enduring and intense hostility towards US forces of a substantial minority of the Iraqi population, combined with a broad antagonism to occupation by the majority. Even now, two years after an apparent

liberation, there is a clear majority view that the US forces are occupiers rather than liberators and should leave as soon as possible. One problem is that the incoming interim government is hopelessly weak in terms of providing internal security and is entirely dependent on the presence of foreign troops for its survival. Since this dependence is primarily on US military units, the new government has a potential credibility problem in that it can be readily seen as a client regime of Washington.

In practice, this is what it is – in addition to the US military presence, it is the funding from Washington that is paying for much of the functioning of the government, and US advisers permeate all the major sectors of government. Furthermore, some of the incoming politicians, notably Mr Chalabi, have been closely connected with the United States for many years, even if many politicians have rather closer links with Tehran than Washington.

The political situation is also complicated by the failure between Shi'a and Sunni political figures to agree to senior ministries for Sunni politicians, emphasising the view that the government is being “sown up” by Shi'a leaders subject to US influence. This may not be fully accurate but it is a damaging perception, adding to a sense of alienation among Sunni communities that formed the national elite under the old regime.

A second factor is the behaviour and tactics of the US troops. Since the start of the war, the US has lost nearly 1,600 troops killed and over 12,000 wounded, with at least that number evacuated because of non-combat injuries and physical and mental ill-health. While nothing like the casualties of Vietnam or Korea, the effect on a much smaller army has been considerable. Moreover, a largely urban-based insurgency results in formidable unpredictability for the US troops and a persistent trend of response with heavy firepower. As a result of this, civilian casualties continue to mount, with cautious estimates such as those of the Iraq Body Count group suggesting that civilian deaths are heading towards 25,000, the great majority caused by US military action.

The tendency to shoot first is inevitable, given the vulnerability of US troops and the availability of overwhelming firepower, but its effect is to further strengthen support for insurgents, especially in those substantial regions of Iraq where the insurgency is most intense. The assault on Fallujah last November was a notable case, and that city is now beginning to acquire an iconic status across the Arab world that is reminiscent of the impact of Guernica across Europe in the late 1930s.

Fallujah itself remains a largely wrecked city, even five months after the assault. By mid-April only 90,000 of the 250,000 inhabitants had returned to the city, with many of the others still camped out in refugee settlements. A quarter of the houses in the whole city, some 10,000, were destroyed in the bombardment and another 10,000 were damaged. The majority of the city still did not have electricity supplies or piped water, unemployment was estimated at 85% and the economy was largely moribund. For the residents who have returned, the city remains under extraordinarily strict control by US forces. There are only four checkpoint routes in and out of the city, residents have to queue for up to four hours and there is a 7pm daily curfew.

Although Iraqi security forces may be involved in controlling the city, it is the US forces that are clearly in charge of the whole operation and the inference is that this is a city under the near-total control of foreign occupiers. The view is thus of the “city of mosques” subjected to a formidable military assault last November which killed hundreds of people and has left it largely in ruins while remaining under American occupation.

From a US perception, the Fallujah assault was an absolute necessity, given the intensity of the insurgency and the belief that Fallujah was at its centre. The effect, though, has been to further reinforce the view across much of Iraq that this was yet another example of fundamental external control by forces determined to use as much military firepower as might prove necessary to control what is widely seen to be legitimate resistance to occupation.

These three factors, the political uncertainty following the elections, a perception of Iraq as a client state, and the use of force by US troops, all help explain the continuing intensity of the insurgency, but do not fully indicate the nature of the insurgents themselves. One major feature is the near-daily use of suicide bombers, suggesting that there are hundreds of people, mostly young men, who are sufficiently dedicated to be willing to give up their lives. What is not clear is the extent to which the suicide bombers come from within the Iraqi population or are made up primarily of foreign paramilitaries for whom Iraq has quickly become the centre of the war against foreign forces in the Arab world, replacing Afghanistan quicker than anyone might have expected.

From the limited evidence available, only a small minority of the insurgents are from other countries, perhaps as little as 10%, although there is some evidence that paramilitary recruits from the western Gulf states and North Africa enter Iraq for periods of weeks or months to gain training and combat experience, before returning to their own countries to work in opposition to local elites.

Within Iraq itself, part of the insurgency is being mounted by foreign paramilitaries, a small faction continues the radical Islamic paramilitary activities that were present during the Saddam Hussein regime, and there appear to be large numbers of supporters coming from elements best described as Sunni nationalists. Beyond this, though, much of the core of the insurgency stems from Ba’athist elements, many of which went to ground in the final days of the old regime. Most of them have substantial military training, including insurgency tactics, they have massive quantities of weapons and munitions available and they believe that they can force the US military to leave Iraq and even establish a neo-Ba’athist regime.

In the long run, it is a forlorn outlook – Iraq has far too much oil for US forces to leave in their entirety, the Kurdish north-east of the country would resist such a regime with a profound intensity and Iran would be bitterly opposed to such an emergence. At the same time, it is a outlook that will be extremely difficult to counter, even given the demographic realities of the Ba’athists coming from a small minority of the population.

Given the current intensity of the insurgency, it is possible that the next few months will see an agreement on the formation of an interim government that will include

significant Sunni political figures in key ministerial positions. It is just possible that this will begin the process of undermining support for the insurgents. On the other hand, this is only meant to be an interim administration and it has already served three of its intended eleven months without being able to function as intended. Furthermore, the insurgents have access to almost unlimited quantities of supplies and their current level of activity is about as high as any time in the past two years.

Beyond this there is one enduring and uncomfortable issue – Iraq is seen across the region as a major Arab state, at the heart of the Arab world, that is under a forceful and, in all probability, long-term foreign occupation. At the very least that must be seen as an unpredictable factor, but certainly one that suggests that a political solution to the insurgency is going to be extremely difficult to find.

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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> and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.

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