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US Options in Iraq

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At the end of April, the security situation in Iraq looked particularly bleak. There had been a lull in insurgent activity at the time of the elections at the end of January and in the weeks that followed, but it came back with renewed effect by early March and the violence was maintained in April. The situation was made worse by a political stalemate lasting three months that prevented the formation of a full cabinet in the new Iraqi administration. Given that this interim government was only due to hold power until the end of the year, and was expected to formulate a new constitution by August, the prognosis for a stable political settlement involving Sunni politicians as well as Kurds and the majority Shi'a was poor.

Even so, there appeared to be a possibility that the announcement of a cabinet at the end of April might have a positive effect and, to some analysts, May was therefore seen to be a pivotal month. If there were to be a decrease in the level of insurgent activity, stemming perhaps from a loss of community support, then there would be some reason for longer-term optimism. This would be in marked contrast to the impasse that had developed in Iraq, as discussed in last month's briefing (*The Iraq Impasse*, April 2005).

In the event, there was an opposite effect; the weight of evidence indicated that the insurgency was actually gaining in strength. During May, the US death toll, at 80, was the highest for five months, and the loss of life among Iraqis was massively higher, with at least 500 people killed. The US casualties also included over 550 wounded, with about half of them serious injuries. Given that US forces were progressively concentrating on the training of Iraqi police and army units, and were less heavily involved in patrol activities, this level of casualties was causing particular concern.

One development towards the end of the month was the increasing prominence of a point of view, both from senior military in Iraq and by US political figures, that the insurgency would not be defeated by coalition forces but only by Iraqi security forces supported by an Iraqi nation that needed to become increasingly opposed to the insurgents. This change of outlook contrasted markedly with the views that were common in US quarters in the first two years of the war. While acknowledging the problems, there was almost always an unwritten assumption that coalition forces, dominated by the exceptionally well-equipped US armed troops, would eventually be able to control and defeat the insurgents. This new orientation was effectively an admission that the insurgency would not be countered by military means alone. Even so, it was also acknowledged that Iraqi security forces would require some years of training to bring them to the point where they could exert control.

At the same time, it was also clear that there would be a substantial and permanent US presence at perhaps four major military bases, even if it did eventually prove possible to reduce the occupying forces. The question of permanent bases first surfaced in a *New York Times* report shortly after the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003. There had been little further information available, apart from some data on major construction projects at several bases, but further reports in the US press during May appeared to confirm the validity of the original story.

Given the difficult situation facing US and other coalition forces in Iraq, it is appropriate to consider the possible options from the point of view of the Bush administration. There are essentially four possibilities for the United States – defeat of the insurgency, redeployment of US forces in Iraq, a US defeat and withdrawal or a long-term conflict with an uncertain outcome.

1. Insurgents defeated

The insurgency is brought fully under control within a year or so, by a combination of US military capabilities and the rapid development of the Iraqi security forces, and a government is in place in Baghdad that is supportive of the United States.

If this was to happen, then the situation within two to three years might involve US forces numbering barely 20,000 in the country as a whole, located in a few major bases that might primarily be adjacent to Baghdad and the major oil fields. Together with substantial forces in neighbouring Kuwait, the United States would have the means to support a client government in Baghdad should it face renewed security problems at a later date. Indeed, in view of the possibility of a later upsurge, the Iraqi government could be more or less guaranteed to be cooperative with Washington since its survival could well depend on the future availability of US military power. While such an outcome would be immensely attractive to the Bush administration, given the current circumstances, all the indications are that there is little prospect of this.

Furthermore, such an outcome could have long-term consequences for the United States. It would necessarily involve a substantial US military presence measured in decades rather than years, helping to maintain the security of Iraqi oil supplies and exerting a wider influence in the Persian Gulf. This might even ensure an amenable Iran, one that would be unlikely to cause any instability in the face of US military success and the indirect control of a client government in Baghdad. In practice, even in this “ideal” outcome, there are two related issues. One is that the very presence of such large US forces in Iraq would be likely to prove a magnet for the wider movement of Islamic paramilitaries, whether linked directly to the al-Qaida movement or not. Furthermore, such paramilitary groups are not operating on a week-to-week or month-to-month timescale, but see their confrontation with foreign occupying forces and local elite regimes as measured in decades. A US military presence operating over a similar timescale would stimulate radical paramilitary responses for as long as it was there.

2. Redeployment of US Forces in Iraq

A second outcome could be the maintenance of a substantial US military force at the designated permanent bases in Iraq but also in a number of other bases away from the major centres of population.

Such a situation might involve 60-80,000 US troops – a large number but markedly less than the 150,000 currently in Iraq, and therefore reducing the current problems of overstretch that are affecting the US Army in particular. Furthermore, such a force would be very much a back-up force to Iraqi government units. It would have essentially disengaged from the urban areas and would therefore be less prone to casualties, even if there were occasions when it had to provide military back-up for the Iraqi government. If such support was primarily a matter of airpower, then the consequences in terms of casualties could be even lower. Moreover, a much-diminished presence of US forces in

urban areas might eventually limit the extent of anti-Americanism, even among the Sunni communities.

Such an outcome would depend on the extent to which Iraqi government forces could control the towns and cities of Iraq, but, if this proved very difficult, it would be an outcome that would still involve far less problems for the United States military than the current insurgency. It would be a crude calculation – and could even be a matter of letting the urban areas of Iraq take care of themselves, while securing the strategic oilfields and their export routes, working in particular with the Kurdish communities in the north east of the country.

Such a development is, to an extent, in line with what is known about the plans for the permanent military bases. There is likely to be one base relatively close to Baghdad, perhaps 40 miles away. This could serve as a support base for the government of the day, but would still be well away from any major urban area to limit attacks on the base by insurgents. Two other bases are expected to be located in the northern and southern oilfields, with the northern base perhaps on the fringe of Kurdish-controlled territory and the southern base close to the major oil fields but also near enough to Basra, Um Qasr and the oil export terminals on the Persian Gulf. The fourth base is likely to be in western Iraq, quite close to the Syrian border but also in the region of the western desert that may have substantial oil deposits still to be proved.

This second outcome depends on a rapid degree of success in training Iraqi security forces, or else an acceptance that the United States can serve its principal interest of securing Iraqi oil reserves while allowing the cities to be in a near permanent state of unrest and insurgency. It would be an uncomfortable solution but might be more realistic than any thought of fully controlling the insurgency.

Where it would most likely prove unworkable is that substantial military forces would be required to secure the oil supply routes, the insurgency might evolve in a form that could not be limited by the use of airpower, and there might even be a violent change of regime, bringing to power neo-Ba'athists or another deeply anti-American regime. In such circumstances, a further effort at regime termination might be required, with all the military and civilian consequences that this might entail. Even if there was not such a regime change, there is no guarantee of a diminishing insurgency, and the sizeable US presence in Iraq would still act as a magnet for the broader regional groupings of Islamic paramilitaries. From their perspective, it would still be seen as a neo-Christian occupation, in alliance with Zionist Israel, that was seeking long-term control of Arab oil.

3. US Withdrawal

The third option is consequent on a complete change of policy in Washington involving an acceptance that the Iraq operation is a disaster and that the only option is a rapid US withdrawal, even before Iraqi security forces can be expected to maintain control.

Whatever the eventual outcome in Iraq, be that a civil war or even the rapid emergence of a neo-Ba'athist regime, such a withdrawal would at least bring to an end the continuing loss of life and injuries among US forces and the growing domestic antagonism to the Iraq War.

Such a change of policy is unlikely but not impossible. One of the developments in recent months has been the change in the public mood in the United States, with a marked decline in support for the war in Iraq. Even with George W. Bush's re-election only seven months ago, there has been a substantial shift in public opinion in two respects. One is that there is growing opposition to the war itself and the other is that a large proportion of Americans does not feel that the Iraq policy is making the United States any safer.

Although the ongoing violence in Iraq hardly features on the network news channels unless there is a particularly major incident, the effect of the sheer numbers of casualties is becoming much more prominent across the country in a quite different way. With 1,700 troops killed and many thousands evacuated back to the United States with long-term and often severe disabilities, this is bringing home to people the costs of the war on a township or city district basis. More than 10,000 families and far larger numbers of friends and more distant relatives have been directly affected by the war in this manner, and while their predicaments and frequent unhappiness are not addressed in the national media, they are picked up by local newspapers and radio and TV stations. The end result is a growing awareness, at community level, of the human costs of the war to the US armed forces. This is coming at a time when some of the leading independent analysts and some senior military are questioning the US military posture in Iraq, even to the extent of querying its long-term viability.

It would be quite wrong to claim that this amounts to sufficient political pressure to result in a real change in policy, but it is certainly the case that a further increase in the intensity of the insurgency could make this a central issue in the second George W. Bush administration. Against this, though, are the consequences of a precipitate withdrawal from Iraq. Were this to happen, and given the central importance of the security of Persian Gulf oil reserves, the United States would be facing its biggest foreign policy reversal in decades. Withdrawal from Iraq would cripple its entire policy for ensuring Gulf security and would have much wider implications for the whole idea of a New American Century. In such a context, the idea of a rapid withdrawal is highly unlikely unless there was to be a calamitous increase in US casualties in Iraq.

4. Endless Insurgency

The final possibility is that the current insurgency lasts indefinitely, becoming something of a stalemate between weak Iraqi security forces that cannot maintain the security of the state on their own, backed by the US military presence, and insurgents who cannot develop sufficient strength to threaten the Iraqi government or cause an American withdrawal.

Such a situation could last for several years but might ultimately lead to some kind of compromise in which a majority of the supporters of the insurgency were brought into the political process sufficiently to undermine the insurgency itself. While this is certainly possible, it would involve some years of war, with the huge human costs that this would involve, and even such an eventual compromise is by no means certain.

While most analysis of the Iraq War concentrates on the insurgency as a domestic matter, it also has to be seen in its wider context. Over the past two years, Iraq has become a magnet for radical Islamic paramilitaries, giving a substantial boost for recruitment into movements such as al-Qaida and providing a basis for a region-wide growth in anti-Americanism. Even if the insurgency within Iraq was eventually to diminish, with some degree of political compromise achieved, a fundamental aspect of US policy will still be the maintenance of

permanent bases in the context of that essential feature of US policy in the Middle East, ensuring the security of Gulf oil reserves.

Prospects

Given current circumstances it is highly unlikely that the insurgency can be defeated within the next two to three years. Nor is it likely that there will be a fundamental change of policy by the Bush administration leading to an early withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq. What is more probable is the continuing of the insurgency, with neither of the opponents able to achieve their aims. It is certainly possible that this might eventually lead to the second of the outcomes discussed here – the effective abandonment of the cities by the United States and a retreat to the margins, given that those “margins” include the major oil fields.

What does have to be recognised, and is almost always ignored in current analyses of the conflict, is the underlying significance of the region’s immense oil reserves – two-thirds of the world’s total supplies and vital not just to the United States, Europe and Japan, but increasingly to China and India as well. This is the main reason why the United States will not leave Iraq, whatever the difficulties it faces, and it is for this reason that we face the prospect of decades, not years, of conflict.

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