

International Security Monthly Briefing – June 2005

## Iraq, Afghanistan and US Public Opinion

*Professor Paul Rogers*

### A Long or Short War?

During June, the insurgency in Iraq persisted at the intense level of the previous month, with numerous attacks on the Iraqi police and security forces, further bombings of oil facilities and a number of assassinations. Several hundred civilians were killed during the course of the month, and the US forces had 78 people killed and well over 400 wounded.

Against this background, and in the early part of the month, there were remarkably conflicting statements from senior members of the Bush administration about the likely development of the war. The Vice-President, Dick Cheney, expressed the view that the insurgency was in its last throes, a view that has been expressed many times over the past two years by others in the administration, yet still unusual since it came at a time of particularly intense insurgent activity.

Very shortly after Mr Cheney's comments, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, took a very different view, suggesting that insurgencies such as that in Iraq could take as long as 10 or 12 years to overcome. His opinion was even more significant in the light of comments he had made a short while earlier, where he said that the insurgency could not be defeated by US forces but had to have an essentially internal solution, with Iraqi forces eventually taking the main responsibility for security. Although an apparently straightforward comment, the implications of this statement are considerable, especially in the context of the many occasions since April 2003 where US military officials have expressed confidence in a near-term victory.

The implication of Mr Rumsfeld's view is that the substantial US military forces, numbering close to 200,000 if one includes support forces in neighbouring Kuwait and air and naval units elsewhere in the region, are not able to defeat an insurgency numbering a core of perhaps 20,000 activists. Bearing in mind that the United States military has by far the best equipment in the world, including a huge range of satellite, airborne and ground-based intelligence and reconnaissance systems, such a view being expressed by the US defence leadership is remarkable in its own right. Taken together with Mr Rumsfeld's subsequent comments about a 10-12 year insurgency, a picture emerges which is in keeping with the previously-expressed views of a handful of independent analysts in the United States and Western Europe, but these have been views which have been almost entirely ignored, if not derided, until now.

Mr Rumsfeld's opinions caused immediate consternation, especially when placed alongside those of Mr Cheney. Subsequent statements from the Vice-President's Office suggested that "last throes" could imply a period of continued violence, and Mr Rumsfeld's comments about a long war were immediately countered by a statement from the new Prime Minister of Iraq, Mr Jaafari, that he expected security to be greatly improved within two years.

The levels of violence in Iraq during the course of June certainly indicated a robust insurgency deeply rooted in a support base which stretched across a significant minority of the Iraqi population, but there were two other developments during the month that may together be more significant in determining longer-term trends, not just in Iraq but concerning Mr Bush's wider "global war on terror". One of these was a substantial swing in public opinion in the United States, moving quite markedly away from support for the war, and the other was a further upsurge in violence and insecurity in Afghanistan.

## Afghanistan

In last March's briefing in this series (*The Bush Administration, Insurgencies and Iran*, March 2005), the point was made that there were some signs of hope in Afghanistan, but this was in the context of major problems of opium production that had returned Afghanistan to its position as the world's leading supplier of illegal heroin. One of the reasons for a certain degree of optimism was that an anticipated Taliban revival the previous summer had not materialised, even though there were continual instances of violence. In the past three months, much of the limited optimism has evaporated as the levels of violence have escalated. In April, in particular, there were several major incidents involving Taliban insurgents in conflict with soldiers of the 17,000-strong force that the United States is currently maintaining in the country. There were also a number of attacks on Afghan police units as well as assassinations of officials working for the Afghan government and for non-governmental organisations.

This pattern continued into May, and there were added anti-American tensions after *Newsweek* reported the apparent desecration of copies of the Koran at the detention centre at Guantanamo in Cuba. During June, actions by Taliban elements increased once more, and there were two particular factors that were indicative of the new capabilities of the Taliban. One was the marked tendency for guerrillas to act in much smaller groups than before and to operate more in urban environments, including the use of improvised explosive devices. There are indications that paramilitary groups from Afghanistan have been gaining experience in Iraq and then returning to Afghanistan. This is an extraordinary reversal of the trends that were more common in the 1990s, when it was Afghanistan that provided combat and guerrilla experience for paramilitary groups.

The second factor was the ability of Taliban elements, on occasions, to operate in large numbers in defined environments. In the middle of June, for example, there was an exchange of fire between Taliban guerrillas and government units in the district headquarters town of Mian Nishin in Kandahar province that left nine Taliban dead. This was then followed by a much larger assault on the town that left it under the control of the Taliban for two days before they were repulsed, with substantial loss of life on both sides, by Afghan forces backed up by US air strikes. Fighting then escalated elsewhere in Afghanistan, especially in Zabul province, with the United States bringing in helicopter gun-ships and A-10 ground attack aircraft supported by British Harrier aircraft. There was further heavy loss of life on both sides. Then, at the end of the month, US forces lost 18 people when a helicopter was shot down while trying to reinforce a Special Forces unit that had become isolated.

## US Domestic Opinion

Although there has therefore been a marked deterioration in the security environment in Afghanistan, this has only been a trend of the past three months or so, and there has been

very little domestic reporting in the United States of the individual incidents except where there have been US military casualties. As a result, the extensive commitments of US forces to Afghanistan, the ongoing insurgency there, and the contrast with the original expectations of a peaceful transition, have had relatively little impact on US public opinion. What has been much more significant has been the impact of the widespread violence in Iraq, with a marked change in public opinion that has been surprisingly sudden.

President George W. Bush won a reasonably clear-cut victory when he sought re-election last November, and this was immediately taken as a firm mandate for his policies, including the 'war on terror' and the continuing occupation of Iraq. It has therefore been a surprise that public opinion has moved markedly away from the previous support for the Iraq War, and that this has been a sudden change, rather than a slow and progressive shift.

In a Gallup survey taken in June, nearly 60% of respondents were in favour of a partial or complete withdrawal from Iraq, this being the highest figure since the war began well over two years ago. In another poll conducted for the *Washington Post* and *ABC News*, the proportion of those polled who believed that the Iraq War had not made the United States a safer place was above 50% for the first time, and in the same poll, nearly 40% said that the Iraq War was coming to resemble Vietnam.

The change in public mood has been paralleled by an increasingly difficult recruiting environment for the US armed forces, both for regular troops and for reserve forces. The US Army, in particular, has had to put substantially greater resources into gaining recruits, including the deployment of many more recruiters, the investment in a large-scale television campaign and the provision of substantially increased cash bonuses to new personnel on enlistment.

In spite of all of these inducements, the Army has persistently failed to meet its monthly recruitment targets, even when those targets have, on occasions, been lowered. The Army's May recruitment figures were actually some 35% down on the original target figure, and Army National Guard enlistment was down by 29%. Recruiting into the Marine Corps was less badly hit, as was recruitment for the Air Force and Navy, but the Marine Corps is relatively small compared with the Army, and regarded as more of an elite force, and the Air Force and Navy have suffered proportionally far fewer casualties in Iraq than the Army.

The change in public mood, and in recruitment patterns, is not easy to analyse given that the US national print and broadcast media have not provided coverage of the Iraq War that is anything like the intensity of the coverage in the latter part of the Vietnam. There have been some exceptions, particularly among the East Coast broadsheets such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, but most of the broadcast media have given relatively little coverage and some, such as Fox News, have been unswervingly positive in their assessments.

Throughout the period of the war in Iraq, the Bush administration has been consistent in providing minimal official coverage for the return of those killed in action to the United States, and there has been a marked absence of senior administration officials being present at funerals or visiting the main receiving hospitals for casualties. In the ordinary way, this might have been expected to diminish the effect of casualties on public opinion, the more so as they represent a much smaller number than the losses in Vietnam.

Three factors appear to be making a difference, two of them affecting public opinion as a whole and the third having a greater effect on recruitment. The first factor is that while the loss of life is still under 2,000, there have been large numbers of serious injuries. The reason for this, as noted in earlier briefings in this series, is that a combination of body armour and very high levels of battlefield emergency medical treatment have meant that far more soldiers have survived, but have often done so with severe injuries including limb amputations and head, throat and groin injuries. Well over 10,000 troops have been evacuated from Iraq with combat injuries and an even larger number have returned to the United States with physical or mental illnesses or non-combat injuries.

The total number of people returning to the United States with serious injuries having potentially life-long effects is not available, but is now likely to be somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000. The effect of this, combined with over 1,700 deaths, is that communities across the United States are experiencing first hand the effects of the war, often with reports in local newspapers or local radio and television. Given that such media play a larger role in the United States than in most European countries, where national media have a greater impact, there appears to be a cumulative effect that is bringing home to people the costs of the war.

The second factor is that there are now some very competent analysts, some of them ex-military, who are casting doubt on the conduct of the war and are suggesting the need for new strategies. While such people have little impact outside of some broadsheets and National Public Radio, they are probably having an effect on opinion formers and some sectors of the legislature. It is noticeable that in the House, with its members serving two-year terms, there is a tendency to respond much more rapidly to changes in the public mood than in the Senate, with its six-year terms, and there have been recent examples in the House of bipartisan demands for the administration to consider an exit strategy from Iraq.

The final factor, relating to recruitment, takes us back the issues of casualties. By and large, the US Army recruits from relatively poor communities, rather than from across all sectors of society. This has been a long-term trend and it means that in those districts that are more likely to provide recruits, there will already be many people serving in the Army. As a consequence, there is likely to be a greater knowledge of the level of casualties in Iraq because they disproportionately affect such communities. Such knowledge, and the hesitations about the war among those home on leave, combine to create a mood of greater resistance to recruitment, even if other job opportunities are poor.

While it is somewhat rash to suggest that the developments of the past few weeks are part of a long term trend, since even Mr Rumsfeld himself is now talking of an insurgency lasting many years it is reasonable to suggest that views on the war among the population as a whole are unlikely to become more positive. That there has been such a change is shown by the decision of President Bush, at the end of June, to deliver an address to the nation on the need to stand firm. In that address, in front of a military audience, his main emphasis was on linking the Iraq War specifically to the more general 'war on terror' seeking to justify to his wider audience that the Iraq War was and is a response to the 9/11 attacks and therefore demands patriotic support. That such an address was thought necessary indicates the concerns in the administration over the change in the public mood.

## Any Change in Sight?

Do these developments mean that any major change in the administration's policy in Iraq is likely in the short term? In terms of the options discussed in last month's briefing (victory, precipitate withdrawal, redeployment within Iraq, or a continuation of the current military posture), it is highly unlikely that there would be any immediate and wholesale withdrawal unless there was a massive further change in the public mood embracing intense opposition to the war. It is also highly unlikely that any kind of victory will be achieved over the insurgents during the life-time of the Bush administration. This leaves two choices, continuing with current policies or redeployment away from the cities, concentrating on the oil-production zones.

It is just possible that some degree of redeployment might now be considered, and it is even possible that such a redeployment might involve a new attempt to invite multinational forces into Iraq to play a more active role in internal security, perhaps even under a United Nations umbrella. This latter action, though, is unlikely, both from the perspective of the administration and its attitude to the United Nations, and the deep suspicion of most UN member states over the risks of an involvement in Iraq.

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that, in the near future, there will be no substantial change of policy, the war in Iraq will continue, as will the wider 'war on terror', including substantial military operations in Iraq. It also has to be recognised that if there was to be another major attack on US interests of the level of the 9/11 attacks, either in the United States or overseas, then the public mood would be likely to swing markedly in favour of the administration's current policies, with an intensification of both the war in Iraq and the wider conflict.

---

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.

The second volume of these briefings from May 2004 to April 2005 will be published in the *ORG International Security Report 2005* later this year.

---