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THE POLITICS OF WAR

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In the period from June to September, domestic opinion in the United States began to shift towards opposition to the Iraq War to an extent that had not been apparent in the previous two years. This was partly due to the steady stream of casualties, both those killed and the many thousands seriously injured. Although the federal government did much to avoid publicity for these losses, the local media across the United States did report the deaths or serious injuries, often at neighbourhood or district level. With some 10,000 people killed or maimed, this meant that there was a growing awareness of the human costs of the war.

The impact of the casualties was also publicised by the actions of Cindy Sheehan, who had lost a son killed in Iraq, when she camped near President Bush's Crawford ranch in Crawford, Texas for much of August. She became a focus in an unexpected manner, providing the domestic media with a means of relating to the unease that had been developing across the country for several months. Other factors indirectly affecting the Bush administration were its failures over the effects of Hurricane Katrina, and also a perception that the frequent expressions of optimism over the progress of the Iraq War were simply not being borne out in practice. By November, the political climate in the United States was changing quite markedly. This raises the question of whether there will now be a major change of policy over Iraq and this, in turn, relates to events both in Iraq and Jordan.

The Insurgency

The months of October and November were amongst the worst for US casualties since the war began, apart from April and November 2004 when the two assaults in Fallujah proved particularly costly. In these two most recent months, 180 US troops were killed and over 1,000 injured, with over 400 of them sustaining serious injuries. This was in spite of the fact that US forces were engaged in a number of high profile attacks on insurgents in which helicopter gun-ships and strike aircraft were used repeatedly to take advantage of the overwhelming firepower that the United States could bring to bear. The insurgency, meanwhile, continued without a pause in other parts of the country, with a series of brutal yet effective suicide attacks, frequently made against Iraqi police and security force units.

One of the most striking examples of the capabilities of the insurgents came at the end of November. For much of the month, US forces had mounted a series of major military operations against presumed rebel centres in western Iraq, towards the Syrian border. They were being conducted on the basis that these town and villages were both the centres for insurgent support and also served as crucial transit routes for jihadists entering Iraq from elsewhere in the region through Syria.

One particular operation involved 2,000 US Marines and 500 Iraqi troops in action in the town of Hit. While that operation was actually under way, a force of several hundred heavily armed insurgents attacked US bases and Iraqi government offices in the nearby regional administrative centre of Ramadi, a previous focus of US military operations. The insurgents then proceeded to take over areas around the city centre, setting up roadblocks and patrolling the streets. It was a symbolic gesture in that they only maintained this stance for a few hours, melting away into the neighbourhoods immediately afterwards. There were no deaths and few injuries and the US military could claim that it was no more than a gesture. In one sense it was, but that misses the point – in the midst of a nearby US operation, the insurgents were able to put together a force of hundreds of militia, take over the centre of a city and then disappear.

This follows a pattern that has been repeated on numerous occasions across western and central Iraq over the past eighteen months. It was particularly noticeable at the time of the all-out assault on Fallujah a year ago, which was followed almost immediately by a partial takeover of the city of Mosul by insurgents.

One of the recent responses of the US forces to this problem has been to combine operations against insurgent centres with subsequent garrisoning of 'cleared' areas by US and Iraqi forces. The problem here is that this either depends on a plentiful supply of US forces, which is proving difficult to maintain, or else on the reliability of the Iraqi forces. The latter remains questionable, in spite of repeated US claims that the training programmes are proving effective. In many parts of Iraq, police units in particular are proving to be inextricably mixed up with militias to the extent that they are not operating under central government control.

Since many Iraqi security units are effectively operating as Shi'a or Kurdish peshmerga units, their opposition to Sunni insurgents and, more importantly, the communities from which they come, exacerbates the targeting of these units by insurgents. During the course of November, much more information came to light over the operation of detention centres, the practice of torture and the use of death squads against presumed supporters of the insurgency. While this in no way downplays the often brutal actions of the insurgents, it does mean that the possibilities of undercutting the motivations of the insurgents are minimal.

A related issue has been the repeated tendency of the US authorities in Iraq to represent the insurgency as increasingly a matter of external jihadists dominating the actions, with the Jordanian paramilitary leader, al-Zarqawi, being a central figure. This has a particular value in domestic politics in that Zarqawi can be described as the al-Qaida leader in Iraq, so it therefore becomes central to President Bush's global war on terror, a point made forcibly in recent speeches by Vice-President Dick Cheney.

The concern with one individual has been an enduring feature of the war on terror since the 9/11 attacks, with Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar being early examples. In practice, there have been few sightings of Zarqawi in recent months, and little indication that he is in any way central to the insurgency. His group may have a singular ability when it comes to publicising their actions, but they are unlikely to be significant in overall terms. One of the markers for this assessment is that of the tens of thousands of suspected insurgents taken into custody in the past two years, only five to ten per cent have been from outside Iraq, and in recent US sweeps through towns and cities in western Iraq, the proportion has been ever lower. The reality is that the insurgency remains an essentially Iraqi phenomenon.

Even so, it is certainly likely that Iraq will become steadily more important to the wider al-Qaida movement in two respects. One is the continuing coverage of civilian casualties and collateral damage on Al-Jazeera and other news channels, backed up by much more propagandistic videos, DVDs and web-based material distributed across the world. The other is the steadily increasing importance of Iraq as a jihadist training zone.

Further indications of this are that young paramilitaries from Afghanistan now travel to Iraq where they are able to spend several months in training camps that have been established, not least in the vicinity of Fallujah in spite of the heavy US presence in the area. They may become involved in the insurgency but, more importantly, they are given direct tuition in the construction and use of a range of improvised explosive devices including remote-controlled detonation systems. This knowledge is then taken back to Afghanistan.

This phenomenon is still small-scale and is certainly not at the level where, as Washington argues, foreign jihadists are dominating the insurgency. Instead, it is more of a marker for the future, providing the al-Qaida movement with a capability that may have a considerable long-term value. One of the

ironies of the current situation is that such jihadist training potential is useful to the al-Qaida movement that sees its conflict with the United States and its coalition partners as stretching over some decades. It follows that it would be best for the movement if the US occupation of Iraq lasted for many years. That is in contrast to the outlook of most of the Iraqi insurgents, where the motivation is much more one of wanting an immediate US withdrawal. Within that contradiction could lie a future conflict of interest between the Iraqi insurgents and foreign jihadists, but there is little evidence of that at present.

Jordan

If the complex insurgency in Iraq is a major problem for the US forces in that country, the multiple bombings of the Grand Hyatt, Radisson and Days Inn hotels in Amman on 9th November was a reminder of the capabilities of the wider paramilitary movement. Back in August there had been an unsuccessful attack on two US warships in Aqaba Harbour. This had caused some consternation in US military circles as the Jordanian government was thought to have had a firm control of radical Islamist movements in the country, and the US Navy had assessed Aqaba as being a safe port for warships, even to the extent of renting warehouses in the port for storage purposes.

The Amman bombings, which killed 57 people and injured scores more, showed that Jordan was even less secure than the Aqaba attack had indicated. Moreover, when these two attacks are put together with the bombing of hotels in Sinai, the attacks in the Balinese town of Kuta, the 7th July bombings in London and the attempted attacks two weeks later, and the bombing of a KFC outlet in a secure district in Karachi, this all suggests that the wider al-Qaida movement remains markedly active whatever claims the US authorities may make to the contrary.

US Political Developments

Although the Amman hotel bombings were seen as significant in Washington, the main issue in the United States remains the persistent insurgency in Iraq and the rising number of US military casualties. What gave this a particular political relevance during November was the expressed view of one particular member of Congress that the US policy was deeply flawed and that withdrawal from Iraq should be actively considered. The problem for the Bush administration was that the politician concerned, John Murtha, could not easily be dismissed as an un-patriotic liberal. Murtha is a decorated Vietnam-era Marine who has served for three decades in Congress and has long been regarded as markedly pro-defence if not hawkish.

Most other political figures can be dismissed, either by impugning their patriotism or by reminding them of previous congressional support for the war in terror in general and the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in particular. This has not proved possible with Murtha, but the Bush administration has chosen to respond by emphasising the essentiality of victory in Iraq. Among neo-conservative commentators there has been a robust defence of current policies with the criticisms, if there have been any, being along the lines that we are not committing enough troops to Iraq.

This is very much in the context of a war which is being won, the consequence being that a pull-out now would be a case of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. It is an extraordinary message, but one that is being repeated time and again, almost now as a mantra from the right. The real question, though, is whether this really is the strategy – to continue and perhaps harden the military posture in Iraq in the expectation of victory – or whether it is disguising a rethink of policy.

The answer to this core question is frankly uncertain at present, but it is probable that some changes are now being entertained although these will fall far short of a precipitate withdrawal from Iraq. What is particularly important to the Bush administration is to avoid sufficient unpopularity from the Iraq War to cause a Republican loss of control of one or both houses of Congress in the mid-term elections in a

year's time. If that were to happen, it would seriously damage the Republican chances of holding on to the White House in 2008.

This domestic political necessity, coupled with the prevailing problems in Iraq, may well mean that the so-called 'Plan B' in Iraq (option 2 of the possibilities discussed in the May 2005 briefing, *US Options in Iraq*), may be implemented over the next six to nine months. This would involve the consolidation of US forces in a number of secure bases, the withdrawal of perhaps 30,000 troops ahead of the mid-term elections next November, and greater efforts to train Iraqi police and security forces. There would be a particular emphasis on helicopter-borne forces, both gun-ships and troop carriers, to back up Iraqi forces when they face the insurgents, but there would also be a marked decrease in the numbers of US ground troops and, just possibly, a consequent reduction in casualties.

Coupled with the tacit acceptance of the power of Shi'a and Kurdish militias to oppose Sunni insurgents, the presence of US-backed Iraqi government forces able to rely in massive US airborne firepower would be sufficient to maintain a semblance of order until after the elections. It would also mean that any Iraqi government, of whatever political complexion, would be reliant on US forces in order to be able to remain in power. It would therefore be under very heavy US influence, making it to all intents and purposes a client regime.

From the standpoint of the Bush administration this would be a messy and incomplete outcome but would be substantially better than the predicament currently being experienced in Iraq. There is no guarantee that it would bring greater stability in the longer term – the use of airpower might in due course incite an insurgent response involving portable anti-aircraft missiles on a much larger scale than at present, and the maintenance of large US bases, however well protected, will serve as a continuing focus for the domestic insurgency, as well as being a long-term cause for the wider al-Qaida movement.

From the Washington standpoint it fulfils two requirements. One is that it may produce slightly more satisfactory circumstances for the domestic political context in the run-up to next November's elections, and the other is that the United States still retains a powerful influence in Iraq which, given the oil and gas reserves of the region, remains utterly essential.

At the same time, even to think in these terms is a cause for reflection on how things have changed compared with the expectations of nearly three years ago. Then, rapid regime change followed by a client regime, a small number of US bases and a clear demonstration to Iran of US intentions and capabilities were all seen as the foundations for the Greater Middle East Initiative, producing regimes across the region that were essentially the allies of the United States. In some circles that may remain the dream but it is certainly not even remotely the reality, either now or in the near-term future. That, though, is overshadowed by next November's elections, and we are likely to see the US military posture in Iraq increasingly dominated by domestic political realities. That is the direction in which the politics of the war is now taking us.

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The second volume of these briefings from May 2004 to April 2005 has just been published by I.B. Tauris in *Iraq and the War on Terror: Twelve Months of Insurgency, 2004-2005*. Copies of the book can be ordered from the ORG online shop at <http://www.orgshop.org.uk>.
