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CONTROL WITHOUT THE CONSEQUENCES

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In political terms, the early part of December seemed to be proving one of the more positive periods for the Bush administration in relation to Iraq. Following several months of increasing opposition in the United States, President Bush and senior administration officials went on the domestic offensive with a series of speeches stressing the progress being made in Iraq. This coincided with two developments within that country – the election of a new administration and polling evidence that a majority of Iraqis were optimistic about prospects for the country.

The elections passed relatively peacefully, not because of increased counterinsurgency activity by the US forces but because the majority of the insurgents within Sunni communities were prepared to allow the elections to take place to ensure a larger Sunni impact on the outcome. The end result was uncertain and it may take months to see a stable administration set up, but it did make for a period of relative calm.

Shortly before the election, the BBC published an opinion poll undertaken by Oxford Research International showing a fair degree of optimism among the 1,700 Iraqis polled across the country. 61% thought the government had done a good or very good job, with only 33% holding contrary views. Furthermore, 64% of those polled thought things would get better during 2006. At the same time, their priorities for the coming year would be improved internal security followed by withdrawal of foreign troops. Furthermore, there were sharp regional variations, with more optimism in the Kurdish north and the Shi'a south and much greater pessimism in central Iraq where the insurgency is concentrated.

This polling evidence, coupled with the successful holding of the elections was used powerfully by the Bush administration during its December offensive, promoting the idea that Iraq had “turned the corner”. Such an optimistic assessment has many parallels from the past three years of the war. They have included expectations on many occasions that particular events would seriously limit if not cripple the insurgency. Examples were the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein in July 2003, the capture of Saddam Hussein himself five months later and the anticipated effects of several sets of elections. Even the assault on Fallujah in November 2004 was expected to hugely damage the insurgency, as that city was seen as its epicentre.

Regrettably, by the end of December the pattern of previous examples of short-lived progress had been repeated, with a swathe of insurgent attacks on US forces, Iraqi police and security personnel and on civilians. The greatest intensity of suffering was experienced by ordinary Iraqis, but December was another difficult month for the Americans, with 68 killed and over 400 injured. The two weeks of the Christmas/New Year period, in particular, were expected to be quiet, but in that period alone US forces had 174 people injured.

Attacking the Iraqi Economy

In addition to the continuing intensity of attacks on security forces and civilians, one other feature of the insurgency that has come to the fore has been an escalation in the attacks on the country's economic infrastructure, especially its oil industry. Before the war, the Saddam Hussein regime was able to maintain oil exports at a rate of around 2 million barrels per day (bpd), sometimes reaching 2.5 million bpd. This was at a time of a tough sanctions regime and may have been only half of Iraq's potential export capability at that time. After the termination of the regime, the oil export levels never regained even the previous levels reached under sanctions, but did get as high as 1.8 million bpd around the start

of 2005. The rest of 2005 saw a pronounced decline and in December oil exports fell to just 1.1 million bpd, the lowest level since exports resumed a few months after regime termination in April 2003. If it were not for the continual acts of sabotage, Iraq could probably export nearly three times the current level, around 3 million bpd, and serious investment in new facilities could double this. The reality, though, is that insurgents have become increasingly skilled at disrupting supplies, sometimes being so effective at blowing up pipelines and destroying road tankers that whole refineries have had to be closed down for lack of supply outlets.

An End to Funding?

The effect within Iraq is that serious fuel shortages persist, there is disruption to electricity power generation and the revenue required to redevelop the crippled economic infrastructure is simply not there. Moreover, this predicament comes at a time when the United States has decided to cease its own funding for reconstruction. Of the \$18.4 billion so far committed about half has had to be spent on security or has been lost as a result of insurgent attacks, and the Bush administration has now decided not to seek any more funding from Congress in the coming financial year. The expectation is that Iraq will have to find its own resources or aid will have to be provided by other countries.

This change in policy is paralleled by a similar if smaller-scale move in Afghanistan, where the 2005 USAID budget for Afghanistan, about \$1 billion, will reduce by 40% in the next year. This is part of a more general move by the United States to cede much of its military posture to its NATO allies. The US will still maintain considerable influence in Afghanistan, not least through a sustained if diminished military presence at the two big air bases at Bagram and Kandahar, but it will seek to do so with fewer commitments and a decreased risk of military casualties.

Back in Iraq, the decrease in funding support is being accompanied by a distinct change in the military posture. It became clear during December that one other military change that had started to become evident earlier in the year, was progressing rapidly. This is a substantial increase in the use of airpower against the insurgents.

Until August 2005, the number of airstrikes conducted against presumed insurgent targets was averaging around 25 a month. By November it had escalated to 120 and was expected to reach 150 in December.

In the past airstrikes have employed large bombs – 1,000 lb or 2,000 lb devices, but satellite-guided 500 lb bombs have become the norm, the expectation being that these would be less destructive in urban areas, avoiding excessive collateral damage. This trend is expected to continue as the first of a new consignment of 3,000 new 250 lb bombs become available. While the sheer level of damage inflicted may diminish, the manner in which insurgents are so closely intermingled with civilians in dense urban neighbourhoods means that avoiding civilian casualties is frankly impossible. Moreover, as the US Air Force and the US Navy intensify the use of strike aircraft in counterinsurgency, so the civilian casualties are likely to increase.

An Evolving Strategy

What emerges from all of this is an evolving strategy that seeks to maintain control but without the complications stemming from insurgencies in both countries that have proved so difficult to control. In Afghanistan, for example, the termination of the Taliban regime was expected to cripple the al-Qaida movement, make the Taliban militias irrelevant and allow the country to develop as a client state of Washington, with a couple of US bases to ensure security. Instead, 19,000 troops are tied down in an enduring insurgency that has seen an upsurge during 2005. The response from the Bush administration is to seek to hand over as much of the security work to NATO, with ISAF expanding into the south of the country, even if that means its being involved in counterinsurgency in addition to more traditional peace-

enforcing and peace-keeping roles. The end result, from the perspective of the Bush administration, should be a reduced US military presence with no diminishing of Washington's influence over the political direction of the country.

In Iraq, it is even more blatant and is also geared very closely to the mid-sessional elections to the US Congress in November 2006. Not only will the United States rely more and more heavily on the use of airpower against the insurgents, but there will be a substantial decrease in funding from Washington to support the reconstruction and redevelopment of the country. Whether that gap will be filled by other countries, by the World Bank or by revenues from oil exports is not clear, but none of these seems likely. No European country is prepared to provide aid at the huge level required, the World Bank would be deeply reluctant to be heavily involved in what remains a war zone, and there is little or no sign of an increase in oil revenues. Indeed, the consistent targeting of oil facilities makes this highly unlikely. It is more probable that Iraq will be allowed to stagger on, as long as US ground forces can begin to disengage from the insurgency and rely more heavily on airpower. In such a role they will continue to act as a guarantor of the survival of whatever government comes to power and, as such, that government will be indebted to Washington and will do its bidding as required.

This convoluted outcome, both in Afghanistan and Iraq, is currently the "best-case" scenario for the Bush administration. If it works, then the otherwise adverse consequences for the mid-sessional elections might be minimised. Better still, a further decrease in US military exposure in both countries by late 2007 will help ensure a better prospect for a Republican candidate in the 2008 Presidential election.

To repeat, though, this is strictly "best case" from an American perspective, anything but "best case" for ordinary people in both countries. It makes no allowance for a further upsurge in Taliban/al-Qaida activity in Afghanistan in the coming spring and summer, an upsurge that could put NATO's limited forces under huge strain and require US reinforcements. Nor does it allow for a persistent and evolving insurgency in Iraq that may make substantial troop withdrawals impossible. Most of all, it does not factor in the greater impact of the more extensive use of airpower. The civilian casualties and physical collateral damage arising from this change of policy will be widely witnessed, thanks to the pervasive presence of media outlets such as al-Jazeera. This will ensure that that indirect US control in Iraq through the use of high levels of force will become even more effective in encouraging an embittered anti-Americanism, not just in the Middle East but in much of the majority world.

Overall, the twin wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are almost certainly still in their early stages. The Bush administration may seek a short-term improvement through these current changes in policy, but these very changes may actually ensure an increase in violence, quite possibly well before November 2008.

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The second volume of these briefings from May 2004 to April 2005 has recently 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>.
