

International Security Monthly Briefing – April 2006

FROM COLD WAR TO LONG WAR

Paul Rogers

In recent months, the term “Long War” has been used more and more frequently by senior Pentagon officials to characterise the global ‘war on terror’ and to give it a status similar to that of the Cold War. The use of such a phrase implies a long and potentially difficult conflict that requires persistence and patriotism. One particular value is that the idea that the United States is fighting a long war for its very security means that loyalty is taken as a norm. For much of the Cold War it was not acceptable to see the Soviet Union as anything other than an “evil empire”. Similarly the “axis of evil” and the terrorist threat from al-Qaida has to be seen as a circumstance beyond discussion – there are no alternatives to fighting this war and to think otherwise is at best misguided and at worst malign.

During the course of April there were significant developments in all three major aspects of this Long War – al-Qaida, Iraq and Afghanistan – as well as the consolidation of the military approaches to be applied in the coming years. In many respects the deterioration in the levels of security in Iraq and Afghanistan might be expected to lead to a re-thinking of the overall approach, but as the Iraq War entered its fourth year and the overall ‘war on terror’ headed towards its sixth year, there was little sign of that.

Al-Qaida

The movement usually characterised by the term “al-Qaida” is diffuse and multifaceted. Leaders and strategists such as bin Laden and al Zawahiri communicate through video and audio tapes and have a following across much of the world, but it is no means clear that they have a major influence on the policies and tactics of individual groups. This is almost certainly the case in Egypt, where there was yet another attack, this time at the small tourist resort of Dahab on the Red Sea Coast of Sinai on 24 April. Three bombs were detonated killing 23 people and injuring 62, most of them Egyptians.

The Dahab attack was the fifth in the immediate region in the past eighteen months, four of them in less than a year and three of them against targets in Sinai. The first, in October 2005, was the bombing of the Taba Hilton and a campsite close to the Israeli border and a resort much frequented by Israeli tourists. This was followed in July 2005 by multiple bombings of two hotels and a market place in Sharm al Sheikh at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula, a the town that has been the location of major meetings on the Israel/Palestine issue.

The following month it was the Jordanian port of Aqaba that was the location for a failed attempt to damage US warships with Katyusha rockets, and in November a series of bombings of three western hotels in Amman killed 57 people. Most recently came the Dahab bombing, with all the incidents showing a concern with western, Israeli or tourist-orientated targets.

More generally, they represented persistent attacks in two highly pro-western states that are considered by militants to be run by undemocratic elites, it being one of the long-term aims of the broad al-Qaida movement to replace such power structures with what would be considered legitimate Islamist rule. One of the main areas of significance for the attacks was that both Egypt and Jordan had very tight security structures yet these were unable to prevent the attacks even in the face of widespread arrests and detention without trial of radical elements.

The Abqaiq Attack

Four weeks before the Dahab attack, another incident, this time in Saudi Arabia, had a significance that was not widely recognised at the time – on 24 February 2006 an attempt was made to damage an oil facility at Abqaiq close to the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia. The attack failed, or at least official news reports indicated failure, but the significance lies more in the nature of the target. Saudi Arabia has the world's largest oil reserves and is also the largest exporter. Most of the fields are located close to the Persian Gulf coast and two-thirds of Saudi Arabia's total crude oil production goes through a single plant at Abqaiq. Described as the jewel in the crown of the Saudi oil industry, Abqaiq processes "sour" crude into "sweet" crude mainly by removing hydrogen sulphide in a series of huge hydrogen-desulphurisation towers.

The plant was attacked by a suicide squad driving two car bombs, supported by a 4x4 attack vehicle. Guards were killed by gunfire and the explosions, but the company running the plant, Aramco, claimed that neither of the car bombs detonated within the main plant, even though early press reports spoke of a fire within the plant. The lack of damage has been disputed by local sources that claim that one car got into the main plant, missing the most important facilities but causing substantial damage. In any case, the key point is that the Abqaiq attack was the first occasion in which a heavily guarded oil plant was attacked in Saudi Arabia. It may well indicate a change of tactics by regional paramilitary groups that recognise the remarkable effects of the continuing disruption of the oil industry across the border in Iraq.

Iraq

Within Iraq itself the modest political progress towards establishing a functioning administration was overshadowed by continuing violence. After the low US casualties in March, the losses were more than doubled in April to 76 killed, with over 400 injured in the same period. The Iraqi casualties were massively higher, with an Iraqi government report of 1,091 people killed in Baghdad alone. While Baghdad has been the central focus of car bombings, kidnappings and death squads, there has been violence in many other towns and cities, and it is probable that the numbers killed in the insurgency and in sectarian conflict across the country are at least double those of the Baghdad area.

If this level of violence is maintained, than Iraq will be experiencing up to 25,000 deaths a year, with many tens of thousands of people injured as well. The US and UK governments have been deeply reluctant to conduct what are termed "body counts" but in recent months have had to admit to over 30,000 civilians killed. These figures are assumed to have come from the Iraq Body Count group that uses an exacting media research methodology requiring specific media casualty reports from more than one source.

This has one major advantage in that it is very difficult for occupying powers to denigrate the figures, and Iraq Body Count was particularly important in the first 12-18 months of the war when the reluctance on the part of military and political leaders to discuss the issue was at its height. At the same time, the Iraq Body Count figures are best seen as baseline figures and the group itself makes the point that the true figures may be very much higher. Even so, the Iraq Body Count assessment is now heading towards 40,000 killed and if the recent indicative figures for Baghdad are taken into account, this will grow rapidly in the coming months.

There have been repeated claims from the Bush administration that the political progress in Iraq, slow as it has been, does actually presage an increase in stability. This is a particularly important line to take as it suggests that troop withdrawals will be possible before the mid-sessional elections to Congress in November. Behind this suggestion is the implied possibility that the United States could withdraw more or less completely from Iraq in the relatively near future, perhaps less than five years. Given the

increasing unpopularity of the war within the United States, the idea of disengagement rather than just partial troop withdrawals seems attractive.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it simply does not match with what is happening on the ground in Iraq. Shortly after the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime just over three years ago, the *New York Times* ran a piece about plans to construct four permanent “super-bases”. One would be adjacent to Baghdad, two would be close to the northern and southern oil fields and one would be in the west towards Syria and close to anticipated areas of oil exploration in the western desert. The report was largely discounted and there have been strenuous denials from Washington of any plans to stay long term – indeed “permanent” is now a term that is banned from the discourse.

The reality is very different, with abundant evidence that the *New York Times* piece was broadly correct. The four bases are all being built up from infrastructure originating in four of the Saddam Hussein regime’s large airfields, with all of them away from major urban areas, making them easier to defend from insurgents. The largest in terms of current troop dispositions is Balad, to the north of Baghdad, and the other three are al-Asad in the west, Tallil in the south and al-Qayyarah in the north. All are being comprehensively re-equipped for air operations and there is a progressive replacement of temporary trailer accommodation with permanent buildings.

As the bases are developed, so US forces are withdrawing from smaller locations and, in doing so, are able to reconfigure in two different ways to add to their security. One is that bases such as Balad have very large taxi-ways and hard-standings, combined with re-engineered and strengthened runways, so that they can take the largest transport aircraft. This means that re-provision is less dependent on vulnerable road transport. The second aspect is that the move towards relying on helicopter gun-ships and fixed wing strike aircraft for supporting counter-insurgency operations is made much easier. Balad alone has space for 120 helicopters, allowing the US forces to position helicopters across much of the most violent parts of central Iraq within 30 minutes.

The inevitable result of the move towards heavy reliance on air power is an increase in civilian casualties, with the further inevitable result of an increase in anti-American feeling, but this is viewed as a necessary consequence of the essential need to cut down on US casualties. It is in this context that the continuing high levels of US troop deaths and injuries are so significant. If the unusually low level of deaths among American troops in March had been the start of a trend, then the military and political leaders could cite this as proof of the viability of the changed policy, whatever the other effects. The early indications are that they cannot even do this.

More generally, the four bases do show pretty conclusively that the United States intends to stay in Iraq for many years to come. This is further supported by the current building of the world’s largest embassy in Baghdad. Constructed, like the bases, primarily by foreign contractors (in this case Kuwait), the embassy will be a massive self-contained and heavily protected compound immediately adjacent to the Iraqi seat of government and close to most ministries. As with the bases, the clear implication is that if the insurgency is finally contained and if a civil war is avoided, then the United States will maintain a dominant relationship with future Iraqi administrations dependent, in the final analysis, on the presence of up to 40,000 US troops at permanent bases. All this, though, presupposes an end to the war, and there is no sign of that at present.

Afghanistan

As anticipated in earlier briefings in this series, there is currently an increase in paramilitary activities in Afghanistan as Taliban and other insurgent groups increase the number of attacks. These are directed against Afghan police and security forces, government officials and offices, foreign contractors and some aid personnel, and troops from the International Security Assistance Force and the US

counterinsurgency forces. It now looks probable that a sustained offensive is evolving, aided by the manner in which paramilitary groups now control significant parts of the Pakistani districts close to the border such as North and South Waziristan. This control allows the militias a high degree of freedom to move each way across the border, but the whole paramilitary offensive is also being aided by the availability of increasing amounts of finance stemming from the opium/heroin trade in Afghanistan.

If one of the aims of support for a civil Afghan government has been to bring opium poppy cultivation under control, then this has been a conspicuous failure, with production now at levels typical of some of the peak periods of the 1990s. Early indications are that the current poppy harvest will be based on one of the largest ever acreages of cultivation, but the more indicative trend has been towards the refining of raw opium into heroin and morphine within Afghanistan itself. This is a recent development but has the important result that the entire trade becomes far more lucrative, since refined products are hugely more profitable. This in turn stems from the profits made by smuggling precursor chemicals into Afghanistan to be used in the refining process, together with the mark-ups that arise from the actual refining process itself.

Many of the stages in heroin production, from cultivation through to access to precursor chemicals and on to refining, are under the direct or indirect control of warlords, criminal groups and paramilitaries. For the Taliban and similar groups, the entire process enables them to access new sources of income to support the insurgency, whether that be in the form of weapons, munitions, food, transport and other supplies, bribes to drugs trade participants and to government officials or simply wages for insurgents. What it adds up to is an escalating problem for the Afghan government and foreign forces from the United States, Britain and elsewhere. The end result is that Afghanistan is simply not experiencing the transition to peace and security that was originally expected.

The Long War

Although the problems in Iraq and Afghanistan are substantial, and the al-Qaida movement and its associates continue their activities, all the indications are that US defence strategy will concentrate on the enhancement of existing capabilities rather than conducting any substantive re-assessment of policies. The Fiscal Year 2007 Defense Budget is a clear indicator of this, as is the new Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). In the immediate future of the FY 2007 Budget and the longer-term time-span of the QDR, the concentration will be on military operations as the Long War evolves. The emphasis will be on force projection, including the possible use of pre-emptive action against states considered a threat. There will also be a further upgrading of Special Forces, with a particular feature being the development and deployment of Special Force units attached to US Embassies in a range of countries. These units will have the capability to take action within those countries, whatever the attitudes of the governments concerned. There will also be the incorporation of unmanned aerial combat vehicles (UCAVs or armed drones) more fully into the armed forces.

In terms both of the wider use of Special Forces and the use of UCAVs, this amounts to the "mainstreaming" of such capabilities into the US armed forces from agencies such as the CIA. It is perhaps the clearest marker of the manner in which the United States military intends to fight this Long War, in spite of all of the problems that are currently being experienced. Earlier briefings in this series have pointed to the need for a fundamental re-assessment of the conduct and likely outcome of the 'war on terror'. Instead the indications are of a hardening of policies and less concern with alternatives as the Long War begins to evolve.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm>.
