

## International Security Monthly Briefing – July 2006

### A THIRD WAR

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#### Introduction

During the course of May and June there were substantial increases in violence in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and a subsequent attempt to curb the insurgency had no discernible effect and the latter part of June saw a marked increase in civilian casualties stemming largely, but by no means entirely, from sectarian violence. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan there was a surge in activity by Taliban militias and other groups, leading to major problems of insecurity across much of the south and east of the country.

At the beginning of July there were few signs of any improvement in the situation in either country, NATO was increasing its forces in Afghanistan and any talk of US troop withdrawals from Iraq had quietly ended. Then, in the middle of the month, a sudden and intensely violent conflict developed within 24 hours between Hezbollah militia in Southern Lebanon and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), following the capture of two Israeli soldiers and the deaths of eight more as a result of a cross-border incident. The Israeli reaction involved the use of massive air attacks leading on to a major war between the IDF and Hezbollah.

Crucially, Israel had the strong support of the Bush administration in its actions in Lebanon. Indeed, from the start of the war in Lebanon, President Bush made it abundantly clear that the Israeli actions that were intended to destroy Hezbollah as a military force should correctly be seen as a key part of his overall global war on terror. As such, Israel was playing a core part in that war and there should be no talk of a ceasefire short of the achievements of these aims. By the end of the month, however, the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Lebanon meant that the war was proving immensely unpopular across the majority world and risked increasing the support not just for Hezbollah, but for wider radical Islamist groups including al-Qaida.

#### Afghanistan

In May and June it became abundantly clear that the Taliban revival predicted by some analysts was actually under way (see June briefing, *Spring Offensives in Two Wars*). The use of the term “Taliban” is somewhat misleading in that the anti-government and anti-coalition groups fighting in southern and eastern Afghanistan include elements of warlord paramilitaries and local oppositional groups as well as groups that could properly be described as Taliban.

As earlier briefings have pointed out, substantial Taliban elements have been active in Afghanistan ever since the fall of the regime at the end of 2001, given that the old regime was not so much defeated as melted away. Moreover, the lack of Pakistani central control over the districts immediately to the east and south of Afghanistan meant that Taliban and other elements had secure bases from which to rebuild their capabilities. There was some expectation that a Taliban revival would evolve during 2005, but it now looks as if that did not happen largely because elements of the Taliban leadership were planning over a longer-term timescale, the intention being to delay such a revived insurgency for a year.

This is now under way and in the first seven months of 2006, some 1,700 people have been killed in the escalating violence across Afghanistan. Most have been civilians, government officials and members of the Afghan police, but they also include staff of international and local non-governmental organisations and the employees of foreign contractors. US sources have claimed that as many as 600 Taliban and other paramilitaries have been killed, and it is certainly true that the US and other coalition forces have

been using their considerable firepower advantages against targets in towns and villages across much of the country.

Extraordinarily this has included the regular use of strategic B-52 and B-1B heavy bombers and of area impact munitions, with this level of firepower frequently resulting in significant civilian casualties. Even so, this has not had a marked effect on the intensity of paramilitary activity. Instead it has increased public opposition to the foreign military presence, including a considerable impact on the activities of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) now operating in Helmand Province as well as its more traditional areas in the north of the country.

The British forces, in particular, established bases in the province in the spring of this year as part of a policy of ensuring security in the province to aid reconstruction and to exert control over opium poppy production. Such an essentially “hearts and minds” operation may involve some limited counter-insurgency actions but the main aim is to be able to use troops to support contractors, Afghan government officials and non-governmental organisations in the overall process of post-conflict reconstruction and development. Instead, the British and other ISAF forces away from Kabul, and especially the British forces in Helmand, have become heavily and almost entirely involved in counter-insurgency operations, including a large element of self-protection.

The extent of the problems was illustrated by a revealing interview given by the senior British officer due to take over command of ISAF at the end of July, Lieutenant General David Richards. He spoke of an assumption within NATO after the termination of the Taliban regime that Afghanistan would be an essentially benign environment. The reality, instead, was of a country that is now close to anarchy. Not only is there the major problem of the Taliban revival but this is in the context of widespread corruption, feuding foreign agencies and unethical behaviour by private security contractors.

It is worth once again recalling that at the time of the termination of the Taliban regime, highly experienced UN officials were pointing to the need for a very substantial international stabilisation force, utilising as many as 30,000 peacekeeping troops. This would need to be coupled with a high level of external aid to help Afghans make the transition to a peaceful society after decades of conflict. This was not forthcoming and the results are now apparent. Even so, the deterioration in Afghanistan attracts little external attention, having been overshadowed by the even greater problems in Iraq.

## **Iraq**

Even here, the intensity of the fighting in Lebanon and the immediacy of the civilian casualties has meant that the western media was dominated by extensive coverage from Lebanon and Israel during the latter part of July, to the substantial exclusion of detailed reporting from Iraq. Even so, all the indications were that the security situation in Iraq was in marked decline. As the June briefing in the series pointed out, the hoped-for easing of the insurgency following Zarqawi’s death did not happen, with close to 1,600 violent deaths being reported in the greater Baghdad area alone during June, a substantial increase on the month before.

More recent figures from United Nations sources have pointed to a much higher death toll across the country as a whole, with 14,338 people being killed in the first six months of 2006, including 3,149 in June alone. The independent non-governmental group, Iraq Body Count (IBC) has sought to track the civilian casualties since the start of the conflict in March 2003, and had a maximum figure of around 44,000 by the end of July. IBC uses multiple media reports to track the losses and regards its figures as thoroughly reliable minimum statistics. As such, it is able to put a persuasive case that 44,000 is a baseline figure and that the true figure for civilian losses could well be very much higher.

What is significant here is that the trend in insecurity is very much upwards across much of the country. This is important because it comes at a time when the Bush and Blair administrations have been expressing confidence that the elected government of Mr Malaki has the legitimacy to ensure that Iraq can progressively take control of its own security. Many analysts doubt such a representation, pointing to the development of large US military bases and a massive embassy presence in Baghdad as evidence that the longer-term aim of the Bush administration is to ensure the existence of a client government in Iraq dependent on the United States for its survival amidst continuing instability.

Within Iraq, though, the issue is not so much instability as escalating violence. While by far the greatest impact is on Iraqi civilians, this is also continuing to affect coalition forces including the large US presence, even though the trend over the past year or more has been to rely more heavily on air strikes rather than ground patrols in conducting counter-insurgency operations. Moreover, there has also been a trend towards moving supplies by air rather than by road convoy. In spite of this, US casualties remain serious. The month of July was relatively light in terms of deaths among US soldiers – the figure of 45 killed was the second lowest for a year – but this disguises the serious problem of combat injuries. In the four weeks to 28 July, 461 American soldiers were injured with the last week of that period being one of the worst for well over a year – 175 troops were wounded, with 112 of them sustaining serious injuries.

The problem from Washington's perspective is that this substantially interferes with the political intention of demonstrating at least a partial withdrawal of troops from Baghdad in the run-up to the mid-session elections to Congress on 7 November. There is now little talk of this, with plans announced at the end of July to re-deploy troops from the Anbar region to boost security in the greater Baghdad area, given the decline of that city into bitter sectarian conflict.

Given this deteriorating situation, coming on top of a renewed and deepening conflict in Afghanistan, one would have expected that the Bush administration would by now be experiencing severe political difficulties at home. That this has not happened has been almost entirely due to the outbreak of a third war in the region, in Lebanon. This reached an intensity by the end of July that came as a profound shock to many observers and has dominated the media and the political discourse in the United States, Europe and the majority world.

### **The Context of the Lebanon War**

The election of the Olmert administration in Israel earlier in the year consolidated an Israeli government policy towards the occupied territories and towards the Hezbollah militia in South Lebanon that had three major elements. One was the withdrawal of the few thousand Jewish settlers from Gaza and the establishment of secure borders around Gaza that still allowed Israel near-total control over the economy of Gaza. A second was the decision to impose a unilateral settlement on the Palestinians as a whole, including limited withdrawals of settlements in the West Bank but maintaining some large Jewish settlements together with near-total permanent control over greater Jerusalem. A related aspect was the construction of a massive wall to separate off most of the West Bank from Israel. The combination of settlements and continuing controls within the West Bank make an economically viable Palestinian state a near-impossibility.

The final element was the development of a very robust set of security and monitoring systems on the Lebanese border to control that border following the Israeli military withdrawal from a "buffer zone" in southern Lebanon in 2000. There remained the problem of the Hezbollah militia and its ability to fire crude unguided Katyusha rockets into northern Israel, and the past few years have seen frequent Israeli air raids into southern Lebanon coupled with actions from Hezbollah that sees itself as the defender of the Shi'a communities of the region. While Israel's adoption of a secure border policy coupled with a unilateral approach to the Palestinian issue was generally popular within Israel, there remained real

concerns over the status of Hezbollah. As a result, reliable reports indicated that the IDF had contingency plans for major operations against Hezbollah.

### The Onset of War

At the end of June, Hamas paramilitaries carried out a remarkable cross-border raid from Gaza, using a long underground tunnel and detaining an Israeli soldier in the process. The IDF responded with huge force, including attacks in Gaza that resulted in many civilian casualties. Two weeks later, Hezbollah paramilitaries undertook an even more extraordinary operation on the Lebanon-Israel border, capturing two Israeli soldiers and killing eight others. They claimed that this could lead to a prisoner exchange, given that such exchanges had happened in the past and that Israel was holding close to ten thousand Palestinians, including over 300 children, most of them without charge.

The Israeli reaction was radically different and involved not just an immediate military operation against Hezbollah but a much wider war against substantial aspects of the Lebanese economic infrastructure, most notably the immediate bombardment and closure of Beirut International Airport. Hezbollah responded with numerous rocket attacks into northern Israel causing some casualties, but these were small compared with the many hundreds of civilian deaths in Lebanon and the movement of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

For Israel, though, Hezbollah's subsequent success in firing longer-range missiles at Haifa, Israel's third largest city, and its ability to continue firing up to a hundred missiles each day into northern Israel, was a major shock, resulting in a marked feeling of vulnerability despite Israel's standing as a regional military superpower. International reaction to the destruction in Lebanon included urgent calls for a ceasefire, especially after the deaths of more than 50 civilians, mostly children, in an Israeli air raid on the village of Qana at the end of the month, and there was a brief if incomplete pause in the Israeli air attacks into Lebanon.

During the course of the first three weeks of the war, the IDF has experienced three major shocks in addition to the original shock of the border incursions, one of them being Hezbollah's missile capabilities. The second, two days into the war, was the severe damage inflicted on an Israeli *Saar-5* class missile corvette, one of the navy's most powerful and well-armed warships, by an anti-ship missile of Chinese origin but deployed by Hezbollah. The third was the tenacity and ability of Hezbollah paramilitaries when engaged by IDF infantry during operations in southern Lebanon.

Given the pervasive mood of insecurity in Israel due to the missile threat, in spite of the massive operations being undertaken in Lebanon, by the end of the month the Olmert administration was not in any way prepared to listen to international calls for an immediate ceasefire. Moreover, where there were calls for such a development among western governments, the United States government made it clear that its fundamental support for Israel overrode such proposals.

The Bush administration is adamant that the war that Israel is conducting against Hezbollah is an integral part of the wider global war on terror that the US has been pursuing for almost five years. Although the termination of two regimes, in Afghanistan and Iraq, has resulted in ongoing conflicts in both countries, there is unlikely to be any re-thinking of the conduct of the wider war. Indeed, what is evident is that there is now an embedded view that the Israel campaign in Lebanon is not just peripheral but is actually central to the overall war. The belief is that if Hezbollah is terminated as a paramilitary movement this will deal a severe blow to wider Islamist movements and to the status and prestige of Iran, a matter of crucial importance since the Bush administration increasingly sees Iran as its main enemy in the war on terror.

The Israeli government is thus in a position to be able to depend on the support of the United States, in spite of opposition to its policies from many western countries, let alone the increasing anger and hatred that is evident across the Middle East. The Lebanon War therefore looks likely to become a central part of the evolving war on terror and, given the deeply embedded nature of the Hezbollah movement, it is a conflict likely to be measured in months or years, and certainly not a matter of a few weeks.

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