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THE AFGHAN SUMMER OF WAR

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Lebanon

During September, substantial numbers of foreign troops entered southern Lebanon to act as an enhanced UN observer and buffer force, with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) withdrawing most of their troops by the end of the month. The introduction of Lebanese Army troops and international forces was meant to lead on to the disarming of Hezbollah units but few observers thought that this would actually happen. Even so, there were very few instances of military engagement between Hezbollah and IDF units, and the progressive withdrawal of the IDF forces meant that any unintended flare up of violence became increasingly unlikely by the end of the month.

Furthermore, it was clear that while Hezbollah might well be engaged in re-supply of its forces, much of its activity was directed towards reconstruction across southern Lebanon. It was not looking to re-engage with the IDF. In any case, there were indications that the Hezbollah missile forces were not substantially degraded by Israeli air attacks during the war, with the exception of some of the small numbers of longer-range systems. Perhaps one third of the short-range systems were either fired into Israel or destroyed by Israeli military action, leaving large numbers still available for use without the need for re-supply.

The extent of Hezbollah's capabilities during the war became progressively clearer during September, most notably as their casualties were almost certainly much lower than Israeli war-time estimates. It was also apparent that the network of underground bunkers that had been constructed in the previous six years was hugely more extensive than Israeli intelligence had suggested. Indeed, Hezbollah had become particularly adept at constructing dummy facilities while effectively disguising many of the operational bunkers.

In Israeli military circles there were attempts to highlight Israeli successes, especially in terms of the extent and concentration of battlefield surveillance during the war, and the destruction of some of the longer-range Hezbollah missiles in the first few days of the war. This could not, however, disguise the real concern at the outcome of the war, and the substantial difficulties experienced by the IDF in their ground force engagements with Hezbollah.

A number of commentators in Israel and the United States have pointed to the need to take further military action in southern Lebanon and there have been indications of a substantial re-arming of the IDF from the United States. Such action is considered essential in some quarters if Israel is to avoid losing the regional perception of its conventional military superiority, given that such "conventional deterrence" forms the basis for Israel's security.

At the same time, the bitter experience in southern Lebanon suggests that a return to open warfare is now unlikely. It would require the withdrawal of international forces, especially the French and Italian troops, followed by a massive Israeli intervention into southern Lebanon and a protracted occupation. Neither is feasible and there is, instead, likely to be a period of substantial reflection among informed circles in Israel. It is possible that this will lead to an increased acceptance of the need to negotiate a more stable peace, even with Hamas and Hezbollah. Alternatively, it could mean some other form of action is considered, possibly against Iranian nuclear facilities, in order to demonstrate the continuing power of the Israeli military system. Given the extent of the control being exercised in Gaza during the latter part of September, it is clear that the "negotiation option" is not yet being followed. Israel does not appear to have yet appreciated the security vulnerabilities demonstrated by its failure in Lebanon.

Iraq

The security situation in Iraq deteriorated further during September. Estimates of civilian casualties across the country now run to around 3,000 each month, roughly equivalent to a 9/11 attack, with most of the violence in the greater Baghdad area and in the important province of Anbar which extends from west of Baghdad to the Syrian border and includes the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. Although the United States maintains substantial troop deployments in Anbar, it appears that the province is simply not under the control of the US forces or of the Iraqi government.

During the course of August and September, as violence escalated in Baghdad, the US military deployed substantially more troops to the city to attempt to restore a degree of security, but there were major questions of reliability concerning the Iraqi police and by the end of the month there was little sign of any improvement. Moreover the increased deployment of US ground forces in the city resulted in a marked increase in casualties. During the course of September, 71 US soldiers were killed and over 700 injured.

All talk of US troop withdrawals in the run-up to the mid-session elections to congress was abandoned, with US troop levels remaining at around 140,000 and indications that the US Army was planning to retain such force levels through to 2010. An overall political response from the Bush administration was to characterise the situation as a central part of a war of national importance that was directly linked to 9/11 and the security of the homeland. The term "Islamofascism" is increasingly used to embrace all elements of perceived opposition to US interests including al-Qaida and its associates, the diverse insurgent groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Israel and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan

When the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan was supplemented by substantial elements from the British, Canadian, Dutch and other armed forces early in 2006, the stated purpose was to aid reconstruction in a number of areas of Afghanistan away from the relatively more peaceful provinces across much of the north and northwest of the country. Helmand Province in the south was seen as particularly important, not least because there had previously been very little of an external security presence, the writ of the Karzai administration simply did not extend to the province and Helmand was possibly the most significant area for opium poppy cultivation.

In practice, many of the forces have instead become directly involved in a bitter and intensely violent conflict, as indicated in recent briefings in this series. It may be that there will be some easing of the conflict during the winter months, but it is appropriate to analyse some aspects of the recent experience and to assess the intentions of the insurgents over the next year. In this connection, three aspects are particularly relevant – the trends in opium production, the tactics of the insurgents and the recent developments in western Pakistan.

The Drug Trade

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006 shows that opium poppy cultivation in the 2005-06 growing season reached its highest level ever, an increase of 59% in the area under cultivation to 165,000 hectares. The production of raw opium increased to a lesser extent, by 49% to 6,629 tonnes, partly due to drought conditions in some areas, although the increased use of poorer quality soils may have been a factor. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this expansion was the increase in opium poppy cultivation in Helmand Province where there was a massive 162% increase in land under poppy cultivation to 69,324 hectares or 42% of the total area under cultivation throughout Afghanistan.

Helmand Province is that part of Afghanistan that has been a particular focus for British troops, deployed partly with the aim of restricting poppy cultivation. However, the recent deployments have come many months after the planting of the 2005-06 crop and could not have had any effect. What will be significant is whether there is any substantial decrease in the area under cultivation, given that the planting season for the 2006-07 crop has recently been under way.

Partly because of the size of the crop, what is termed the “farm gate” price of raw opium declined in 2006 but the overall revenues to poppy growers increased because of the substantially larger crop. In more global terms, the substantial increase in opium production in Afghanistan, which accounts for 92% of global production, has resulted in something of a glut on world markets with consequent decreases in street prices. One problematic result is that as finished heroin becomes cheaper to purchase, so heroin use is likely to increase.

At farm gate prices, the 2006 Afghan crop brought in an estimated \$755 million, about 11% of Afghanistan’s overall GDP of \$6.7 billion. This is somewhat misleading as the total value of the Afghan drug economy, including refining into heroin and morphine, smuggling in of pre-cursor chemicals and trafficking is estimated at \$2.7 billion. If such a total is taken into account, it is likely that the real Afghan GDP is over \$8.5 billion with the drug trade alone accounting for close to a third of this.

As mentioned in earlier briefings, one of the developments in the Afghanistan drug industry is the tendency to refine raw opium within the country, in marked contrast to the situation a decade or so ago when the great majority was exported as raw opium. This development allows for a greatly increased flow of resources into criminal elements, local warlords and Taliban and associated insurgents.

Taliban Developments

The term “Taliban” is becoming an all-purpose word describing elements under a degree of central leadership combined with many other local militias, often loosely connected with the Taliban, the leadership of the latter being mainly located in Pakistan. Within Afghanistan there have been three major developments over the past six months.

One has been the greatly increased level of paramilitary activity against ISAF units and against Afghan police and army units. This appears to have been planned for at least 18 months and has involved the ability to bring together paramilitary concentrations of 100 or more people at any one time. This has been aided by the availability of substantial financial incentives often originating from the drug trade, which has allowed local Taliban commanders to hire young men as temporary paramilitaries, boosting their numbers in specific localities. They may not have much of the ideological or religious commitment of more regular Taliban personnel, but they will frequently have substantial local knowledge and will operate sufficiently close to home for them to require little in the way of logistical support other than weapons.

The second feature has been the manner in which Taliban units have learnt rapidly to respond to ISAF capabilities and tactics, enabling them to modify their own modes of warfare. During the earlier months of the current escalation in violence, large concentrations of Taliban paramilitaries engaged ISAF troops with some success, but ISAF units such as the British forces in Helmand increasingly utilised their substantial advantage in helicopter and strike aircraft firepower to counter Taliban activities. During the latter part of the summer, large Taliban actions became rather less common, and tactics such as the use of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers became more common, especially in urban areas.

Finally, in addition to direct conflict with ISAF units, there continued to be a systematic campaign of extending political influence across much of southern Afghanistan, including the assassination of Afghan government officials, attacks on non-governmental organisations and the closure of schools. This was aided by the failure of the Karzai administration in Kabul to develop effective nation-wide governance and the high levels of corruption evident within the administration.

By the end of September there was some evidence of a decrease in paramilitary activity, but this could well be due to the need for labour to plant the new poppy crop. Furthermore, it could also be part of a pre-planned strategy by the Taliban, with the 2006 campaign being part of a longer-term process partly dictated by developments in Pakistan.

The Pakistan Connection

Following considerable losses experienced by the Pakistani Army in trying to control many frontier districts bordering Afghanistan, the Musharraf regime concluded a peace agreement with elders in the key border province of North Waziristan on 5 September. This provided for the Pakistani Army to withdraw to barracks and to cease offensive military operations, and for the Pakistani government to release well over a thousand detainees. In return, the Pakistani Taliban and other elements would refrain from attacking Pakistani Army units, would not establish what would effectively be parallel administrations and would not facilitate cross-border operations into Afghanistan.

From the perspective of the Musharraf regime this was a necessary compromise, given the somewhat precarious nature of Pakistani governance and the need for continued support from Islamic political parties. The peace settlement was accepted reluctantly by the Bush administration, dependent on whether it would indeed limit the extent to which the border districts would evolve further as 'safe zones' for paramilitaries active in Afghanistan. By the end of September there were indications that cross-border movements had actually increased, one indirect consequence being a delay on the part of the Pakistani government in releasing some of the prisoners as had been agreed in the 5 September settlement.

Taliban Aims

There is a tendency to see the renewed Taliban insurgency as a rather haphazard development without an overall strategy. In reality it needs to be seen in a longer-term perspective. In early 2005 there were some analysts who anticipated a Taliban revival across the south of Afghanistan during the spring and summer of 2005. Although there was increased activity this was not substantial, but this may have been the intention, with another year spent building up a paramilitary capability for 2006.

With the probable lull in activity during the coming autumn and winter, there may be a tendency for western political leaders to assume that ISAF operations over the past couple of months have been successful. This would be a major mistake. It is far wiser to assume that the Taliban leadership sees the 2006 campaign as part of a multi-year process that will lead to the re-establishment of what may be termed the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan. On this basis Afghanistan would once more become the significant global centre for al-Qaida and other Islamist activities, providing training and other facilities and thereby enhancing the jihadist capabilities of the wider al-Qaida movement. Given that that movement has maintained a substantial level of trans-national activity in spite of its post 9/11 dispersal, this would mean a major development in the 'war on terror'.

Whether the Taliban movement is in any way capable of developing a nation-wide uprising as a prelude to regaining power remains to be seen. If such a prospect became evident, then the United States and its NATO allies would almost certainly move towards a massive reinforcement of their military capabilities in Afghanistan. Perhaps the key point is that none of this may become apparent until well

into 2007. Meanwhile any assumption of a longer-term improvement in the security environment in Afghanistan during the coming months will be dangerously optimistic and thoroughly unwise.

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