

International Security Monthly Briefing – October 2006

INSECURITY IN IRAQ

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Afghanistan and Pakistan

During the course of October there was a decrease in the level of paramilitary activity against NATO and US forces in Afghanistan, but there were few indications that this was a sign of the foreign forces making substantial progress. Instead, it looked more likely that Taliban and other elements had been working to a plan that involved higher levels of insurgency during the summer months. Reports from normally reliable regional sources suggested that the fighting would continue during the winter but that there would be more of a focus on small-scale insurgency attacks in centres of population, including Kabul. There would also be a further emphasis on attacks on government figures and public servants. During the course of October there were 148 civilians killed or injured in paramilitary attacks, and there were frequent attacks against Afghan police and security forces. There were nine suicide bombings, mostly directed against police and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel.

In Pakistan, the agreement reached between the Musharaff regime in Islamabad and local elders in the border district of North Waziristan did not appear to be reducing the level of cross-border Taliban activity. In an action that increased tensions at the end of the month, the Pakistani armed forces staged a major attack on the Zia-ul-Uloom madrassa in the border district of Bajour that was claimed to be a centre of Taliban activity. Around 80 people were killed in the pre-dawn raid, most of them students, although the government reported that most were potential or actual paramilitaries. An unconfirmed report suggested that Ayman al-Zawahiri, the al-Qaida strategist who is widely seen as Osama bin Laden's deputy, had been present at the madrassa shortly before the attack. This contributed to the widespread belief within Pakistan that the air strike was actually a US operation directed at Zawahiri. It was a belief that was strongly denied by the Musharaff regime but government sources in Islamabad did admit to a US involvement in the provision of intelligence prior to the attack. One result was an increased mood of anti-Americanism, especially in the border regions, with a number of protests, including demonstrations in Peshawar, the capital of North West Frontier Province.

Iraq

In Iraq, the US operations against insurgents were further intensified during October. The total number of US forces present in the country remained in excess of 140,000 and their pattern of operations was dictated by two main factors. The first was that during the course of 2005 and early 2006 there had been a tendency for US forces to rely increasingly on air power in their counterinsurgency operations. This was in response to persistent casualties among their own troops but was also made possible by the development of large air bases in which substantial numbers of helicopter gun-ships could be deployed. Balad Air Base, north of Baghdad, became a key focus for the ongoing war.

By the middle of 2006 it was apparent that this strategy was not working – although there may have been a decrease in ground patrols, there was no marked decrease in US military casualties. Moreover, and this was the second factor, the level of insurgency increased substantially, with much of Anbar Province becoming a “no-go” area for US and Iraqi security forces, especially in key cities such as Fallujah and Ramadi. The greater Baghdad region also witnessed a marked deterioration in government and US control, with a huge increase in civilian casualties.

The US military was therefore in a predicament in that the changed tactics had not diminished their own casualty levels and had also been accompanied by an increase in overall levels of violence. It was for these reasons that there was a renewed emphasis on troop deployments, especially in the Greater

Baghdad area, an emphasis achieved by withdrawing some troops from relatively quiet areas and also by ensuring an overlap of troops starting or completing their deployments in Iraq.

By the end of October there was no substantive evidence that this return to an earlier approach, albeit with larger troop numbers, was having any impact on the insurgency. Iraqi civilian casualties remained exceptionally high, almost certainly around 3,000 for the month of October, and there was also increasing evidence of major population movements as Shi'a and Sunni families in mixed communities sought to move to safer areas. The effect of this trend was to consolidate the process of intensification of Sunni and Shi'a confessional groups in particular areas, even in Baghdad where there had been substantial areas of mixed communities.

US Casualties

Although Iraqi civilians bore the brunt of the suffering during the course of October, the US military casualties were particularly high. For the month as a whole, 105 US service personnel were killed, the highest monthly total for nearly two years, and more than twice as high as some of the earlier months of 2006. Furthermore, the level of combat injuries was unusually high – in the five weeks to 31 October, over 950 US military personnel were injured, bringing the total since the war began three and a half years ago to over 20,000. This is in addition to an even larger number of people evacuated back to the United States over that period for non-combat injuries and physical and mental illness.

It is not clear what proportion of the 30,000+ personnel evacuated to the United States for treatment actually return to active service, but there are indications that at least half of the 20,000 people sustaining combat injuries do not do so. Although the combat deaths are far smaller than in the Vietnam War, that was in an era of the draft (conscripted), with much larger armed forces. The impact of nearly 3,000 deaths and around 10,000 serious injuries in the Iraq War so far is proportionally much larger than at the time of the much longer Vietnam War, and may partially explain the continuing difficulties in recruitment into the armed forces, especially the US Army.

Domestic Politics and the Iraq War

The Bush administration gives little publicity to the deaths and injuries among service personnel and there is minimal publicity in the national network media. In local and regional media, however, there is more publicity arising from the impact of individual casualties from towns and city districts on their local communities. This may be one of the factors that is sapping public confidence in the war and in the administration's ability to sustain support.

The loss of support resulted in the Iraq issue coming to dominate domestic politics in the run-up to the mid-session elections to Congress on 7 November, and meant that the Bush administration had to engage in a vigorous counter-attack on its Democrat opponents. Two approaches were adopted. One was to enhance the existing process of conflating all the major problems in the Middle East and South West Asia into a single battle that could be linked directly back to the 9/11 attacks five years ago. In this view, the United States is now engaged in a hugely important "Long War against Islamofascism", with that term encompassing not just al-Qaida and the Taliban, but numerous insurgent groups in Iraq as well as Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Indeed, it extends to any radical Islamist group anywhere.

Making such a remarkable connection between diverse groups and 9/11 may seem extraordinary, but its very simplicity is its strength, together with the reminder to Americans of the intensity of the original attacks. Such a reminder is given a particular salience by the many memories re-awakened by the five year anniversary of the attacks.

The linking of the Long War with Hezbollah and Hamas is also significant, given the strong support for the State of Israel that remains within the United States. The traditional Jewish lobby is less vigorous in its support, given that many liberal Jews have been deeply concerned at the policies of recent Israeli governments. While such support has declined, though, the rise of Christian Zionism has brought forward a much more widespread base of support. This extends way beyond the convinced Christian Zionists, although that group alone encompasses well over 20 million people.

In a poll conducted by Zogby for the CNI Foundation, 31% of those surveyed strongly believed or somewhat believed in the theme of Christian Zionism if defined as “the belief that Jews must have all of the promised land, including all of Jerusalem, to facilitate the second coming of the messiah”. A separate Pew poll showed that 53% of those surveyed believed that Israel was given by God to the Jews and a CNN/Time poll indicated that 59% of those polled believed in the prophecies in the Book of Revelations. In such an environment, it makes considerable political sense to present the American predicament as a fundamental conflict with the forces of radical Islam, the key point being to ensure that such a term embraces those movements seen to threaten Israel.

The second electoral approach adopted was that the Bush administration chose to make a fundamental change in its attitude to the oil issue. For most of the last three years there has been a consistent denial that the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime has had anything to do with oil. In the closing stages of the campaign, that stance was reversed and linked powerfully to the risks of a “cut and run” (a rapid withdrawal from Iraq). In a series of campaign speeches President Bush pointed to the risk of extremists taking over in Iraq and then using Iraqi oil as a political weapon causing worldwide shortages and driving the price up to over \$300 a barrel.

In reality, the problems created by the insurgency for Iraqi oil production have been so serious that Iraq is currently a minor player on the international oil markets, responsible for barely 3% of worldwide production. Its exports of 1.6 million barrels a day are far lower than the spare capacity currently in the hands of other OPEC members, especially Saudi Arabia, so that any temporary disruption would have little effect. Even so, as a political tactic it is useful, in view of the recent period of high gasoline prices in the United States. Given that domestic consumers were unused to such prices, the threat of even worse problems consequent on an Iraqi withdrawal could have a marked political impact.

Staying the Course

Among analysts of the evolution of the Iraq insurgency there are two broad views as to the consequences of a US withdrawal for the conduct of the Long War, should such a withdrawal be contemplated. One view is that the chaos that would ensue would make it possible for radical Islamists linked to al-Qaida to establish an environment in which the Afghanistan of the 1980s could be replaced by the Iraq of the 2010s as a focus for extended activities. Moreover, this would not be in distant and rural Afghanistan but in an urban Iraq in the heart of the world’s most productive oil-bearing region. The longer-term consequences of such a predicament are such that any talk of a US withdrawal is highly dangerous.

The contrary view is that the continuing presence of US troops in Iraq is already providing a remarkable opportunity for a new generation of jihadists to gain combat experience against the world’s best-equipped troops. This will provide for new generations of paramilitary jihadists experienced in urban combat against regular troops rather than the rural combat against Soviet conscripts of the 1980s. This view tends to be countered by those who point out that the majority of the civilian deaths in Iraq are caused by internal violence rather than the activities of US and other coalition troops. This may be true, but it is also the case that the direct insurgency against US troops is currently at a level as high as at any time since the war began.

Beyond all of this, though, there remains the question of regional security and this relates to two core factors, the geopolitical significance of Persian Gulf oil, and the nature of the regimes in Tehran and Riyadh. Although current Iraqi oil production is relatively low, the country still has the world's second largest oil reserves, around four times the size of the United States's entire domestic reserves including Alaska. Moreover, the region has close to two-thirds of the world's total oil reserves at a time when the United States and China are both becoming progressively more import dependent. Thus the Persian Gulf remains the world's most important resource base and will do so for several decades.

The second factor links directly with this – from Washington's perspective Iran is currently governed by an entirely unacceptable regime and the stability of the House of Saud is far from assured. If there was to be a wholesale and precipitate withdrawal from Iraq, it might just be possible to maintain reasonably secure bases elsewhere in the region, but this would be a far weaker situation for the United States. A chaotic Iraq with a strong paramilitary Islamist presence, an oppositional Iran and an unstable Saudi Arabia would be close to catastrophic for US security interests in the region.

It follows that the chances of a major change in US strategy in Iraq remain low, and recent Pentagon planning for high troop levels for the next four years are far more realistic. However, the level of US military casualties is such that there may well be an even more determined process of withdrawal to key bases within Iraq combined with the use of intensive air power in counter-insurgency operations. This would involve the large-scale withdrawal from the cities, except the centre of Baghdad, with the US presence being much more a matter of an insurance against a radical Islamist regime gaining power. That this is the current predicament of the US government gives some indication of the extent of the failure of policies in the region. This does not mean, though, that a fundamental re-appraisal of policy is yet likely.

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