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IRAQ OPTIONS AND US POLITICS

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Introduction

By the early part of 2007, the results of the 2006 mid-session elections to Congress were beginning to have a substantial political effect in the United States. The Democrats in both Houses of Congress were seeking to link military expenditure to a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq and the Bush administration was beginning to use such policies to blame the Democrats for limitations on the conduct of the war. Given that the administration had rejected the recommendations of the Baker Hamilton Commission and was proceeding to reinforce the US military commitments in Iraq, this meant that developments in that country would be of central political importance in the United States as the 2008 Presidential Election campaign began to take shape.

Africa and the 'War on Terror'

While the main international security focus in March was on Iraq, two developments in Africa were also relevant. In Somalia, the month saw a considerable upsurge in the levels of violence, with the end of the month being a period of intense conflict in Mogadishu. Following the defeat of the Islamic Courts movement by Ethiopian forces supporting a government in exile, there had been a hope that a transitional government, aided by peacekeeping troops from Uganda and other African countries, would restore a semblance of order. This has not happened. Instead, the Ethiopian presence has had an unexpected unifying effect, with many clan groups in and around Mogadishu uniting in a quasi-nationalist mood of opposition.

A heterogeneous force of rebels, that may be led in part by Islamic Courts elements, has been engaged in bitter conflict that is, according to the Red Cross, at its highest level in 15 years. The fighting has involved Ethiopian use of helicopter gunships against targets in the crowded city, leading to substantial civilian casualties, but the Ethiopians have also had serious losses, not least through the shooting down of a helicopter.

An underlying problem is that the head of the transitional government, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, is seen both as too close to the Ethiopians and also very much associated with a single Somali clan, the Darod, rather than truly representative of Somalia as a whole. A wider issue is that Ethiopia is seen to be acting on behalf of the United States, making it possible for Islamist groups to represent the intervention of Ethiopia in Somalia as part of a wider "crusader" action. For many Somalis, the view is that the Islamic Courts movement did at least bring relative peace to the country for a few months last year, yet it has been ousted with United States support as part of the 'war on terror'. This underlying theme, whether accurate or not, may make it very difficult for Ugandan and other forces to bring stability in the coming months.

More generally, the concern of the United States with security in Africa has resulted in a decision to establish an entirely new unified military command covering most of the continent. Africa Command (AFRICOM) will parallel the development of Central Command (CENTCOM) which developed from the Joint Rapid Deployment Task Force. This, in turn, had been set up at the end of the 1970s at a time of substantial concern in the United States over the security of Persian Gulf oil reserves. CENTCOM was responsible for US operations in the 1991 Iraq War and, more recently, for regime termination and subsequent operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

AFRICOM will be established as sub-Saharan Africa becomes increasingly significant as a source of oil and other strategic minerals. It parallels China's increasing involvement in the continent, especially in Sudan. While China has little military capability in terms of involvement in Africa, it has increasing economic links in many countries, with these causing concern in Washington. Furthermore, the Bush administration regards North Africa and some countries in the Sahel region as being major areas for increased activity from al-Qaida affiliates.

The Iraq Surge

While the security of African strategic resources may be considered important to the United States, they do not match the importance of Gulf oil, and the situation in Iraq remains of far greater concern. The most recent policy development following the rejection of the Baker Hamilton report is the reinforcing of the US military presence with the addition of five brigade combat teams concentrated in the greater Baghdad region. The aim is to bring greater security to the city, working with Iraqi security forces and then moving on to other parts of central and northern Iraq. The reinforcements are being phased over the period February-June and there have been two immediate results, a decrease in communal violence in parts of Baghdad, but an increase in insurgent activity in other parts of Iraq. The end of the month, in particular, was marked by intense violence involving the deaths of around 200 people in Tal Afar, a northern city which was reported to have been brought under US control in intensive military operations over a year ago. Furthermore, US casualties have remained at a high level, with 82 military personnel killed and over 550 wounded during March.

It is possible that the surge will have its intended effect, but the prospects do not look positive at present, yet there does not appear to be an alternative plan being considered by the United States. Two years ago, in the spring of 2005, there was a questioning of US policy and some analysts discussed a range of options. These were discussed in an earlier briefing in this series (*US Options in Iraq*, May 2005), and it is relevant to re-examine them in the light of current circumstances.

US Options in Iraq

Elections in Iraq in January 2005 were intended to bring an interim administration to power that would hold office until the end of the year while a constitution was agreed. There were hopes that the elections would serve as a clear sign that some degree of control was being gained by Iraqis and that this, in turn, would lead to a curbing of the violence. Similar hopes had been expressed on previous occasions, including the deaths of Saddam Hussein's two sons, Uday and Qusay Hussein, in Mosul in July 2003, the detention of Saddam Hussein himself five months later and the replacement of Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority by an appointed Iraqi administration in June 2004. None of these developments had diminished the insurgency, and the January 2005 elections were immediately thrown into some disarray by the failure of the political parties to agree an administration, leading to a three-month stalemate.

Even so, there was some decline in the violence around the time of the elections themselves although there were indications that this was due to intensive security operations mounted by coalition forces. In the event, this was short-lived. In May, US casualties were 80 killed and over 500 wounded, and Iraqi casualties, which were mostly civilians, were 550 killed and many hundreds wounded. The US losses were the worst since the assault on Fallujah, five months before and gave rise to serious considerations of a change of tactics. At that time, and given the reality of a developing insurgency, four outcomes were suggested.

1) Insurgents defeated

The insurgency would be brought fully under control within a year through a combination of US military successes and increasingly effective Iraqi security forces leading to a peaceful Iraq under the control of a government friendly to the United States.

Even if this were to happen, there would be a long-term US military presence at a small number of large bases, with this presence ensuring the stability of the pro-American Iraqi government. Such an outcome would certainly bring a marked degree of peace and stability to Iraq, but would also provide a basis for continued operations by paramilitaries opposed to a US presence in the region. Supporters of the al-Qaida movement, in particular, could well be invigorated by such an outcome.

The actual situation two years later is that the intensity of the insurgency has actually grown, not diminished, the insurgents have been able to develop many new techniques and tactics, often faster than the US forces can counter them, and there is a remarkably "flat" insurgency command structure that is extremely difficult to counter. Reliable reports suggest that as many as 20,000 insurgents have been killed and 27,000 are in detention, yet the insurgency is sufficiently robust to be able to withstand such losses. Furthermore, sectarian violence has increased substantially, with civilian casualties due to the insurgency and sectarian violence reaching up to 3,000 deaths a month. Close 4 million Iraqis are now refugees, with most of them seeking refuge outside of Iraq. Many of them are professionally qualified people essential to the development of the country.

2) Redeployment of US forces

A second outcome considered possible in early 2005 was the re-deployment of US forces to a few major bases, with a decrease in numbers to about 60-80,000.

While this might limit the anti-American elements of the insurgency, it would also involve leaving the cities to look after themselves, even if Iraqi government security forces could not cope. The US strategy would be focused on securing strategic oil resources and also controlling the borders, especially those with Syria and Iran.

Two years later it is evident that aspects of this approach were indeed tried during 2005 and early 2006. While there were no major troop withdrawals, there was a very strong tendency to rely more heavily on operations involving helicopter gunships and fixed-wing strike aircraft, while decreasing the number of ground patrols. This was seen as necessary in spite of improvements in the armour of patrol vehicles, including the large-scale introduction of the new Stryker heavily-armoured personnel carrier. Three factors operated against this approach. One was that the use of such heavy air-based firepower inevitably led to many examples of heavy civilian casualties, given that most of the operations were conducted against heavily populated urban areas. Such casualties, apart from the direct human cost, resulted in an increase in the bitterness directed towards US forces.

A second was that the Iraqi security forces were wholly inadequate in providing stability, with a marked increase in violence during 2006. Finally, some insurgent groups proved adept at targeting helicopters, with the first two months of 2007 being particularly difficult for the US forces. Overall, the "retreat to bases" was only ever a partial process, but its lack of effect on the insurgency was sufficient to encourage the US military to look for alternatives.

3) US withdrawal

The third option would have been a withdrawal from Iraq, within a matter of months or a year at most, representing a complete change of policy.

Although domestic opposition to the war was beginning to develop in early 2005, there was little prospect of such a comprehensive change of approach. President Bush had only recently won re-election, such a withdrawal would have been seen as a disaster in terms of prospects for a New American Century, and the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf were far too important to allow any serious restriction on US influence in the region.

Two years later, and in spite of a surge in domestic opposition that was partly responsible for the Democrat victory in the Congressional elections, there remains little chance of a substantive withdrawal. For the time being, it is the "surge" option that is being undertaken, and this will relegate talk of a withdrawal to the sidelines, at least for the next six months, unless there are extraordinary military reversals for US forces.

4) Endless insurgency

The final option would have been an indefinite insurgency with neither the US forces nor the insurgents able to achieve a comprehensive victory.

This appeared the most likely outcome in May 2005, and it remains so nearly two years later with the war entering its fifth year. The situation is massively complicated by the interweaving of the insurgency with sectarian conflict, and much of the current US surge is concerned as much with controlling such violence as defeating the insurgents. The tactics are in marked contrast to the recent approaches which have involve clearing particular towns or city districts with little subsequent effort to maintain control. In the current circumstances, US forces are due to remain at up to a hundred locations, initially in greater Baghdad, the intention being to maintain control while progressively handing over to Iraqi forces.

This is strangely reminiscent of the situation three to four years ago, when there were many scores of US bases across central and northern Iraq, but there was subsequently a marked concentrating of US forces in much fewer bases. It is just possible that the current surge will have a different outcome, but it is frankly more likely that the outcome will be a continuing and bitter conflict.

Prospects

In the monthly briefing for May 2005, the main conclusion was that:

Given current circumstances it is highly unlikely that the insurgency can be defeated within the next two to three years. Nor is it likely that there will be a fundamental change of policy by the Bush administration leading to an early withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq...

What does have to be recognised, and is almost always ignored in current analyses of the conflict, is the underlying significance of the region's immense oil reserves – two-thirds of the world's total supplies and vital not just to the United States, Europe and Japan, but increasingly to China and India as well. This is the main reason why the United States will not leave Iraq, whatever the difficulties it faces, and it is for this reason that we face the prospect of decades, not years, of conflict.

Even with the substantial shift in US public opinion, there is little likelihood of any change in policy in the next two years. Instead, the period up to the 2008 US Presidential Election may well be marked by the direction of blame towards an inadequate Iraqi political leadership and an unpatriotic Democrat Party as it tries to curb military spending. At the same time, if the situation in Iraq deteriorates still further, and if

the Republicans fail to gain the White House in 2009, it is now possible that a Democrat President could make really substantial changes during the initial honeymoon period. That does at least seem more likely than two years ago.

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