International Security Monthly Briefing – April 2007

FOUR YEARS ON

Paul Rogers

These monthly briefings started in May 2003, so the current briefing completes the first four years of the series. The emphasis has been on three main areas – the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the status and development of the al-Qaida movement, although the analyses have also sought to examine some more broadly based global issues such as socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints. Given the four-year collection of briefings it seems appropriate to draw a comparison with the current circumstances relating to two of the main areas of focus, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the situation as it was in early 2003.

Iraq

In May 2003, President Bush gave his "mission accomplished" speech on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, wearing combat gear and having landed on the carrier in a Navy jet. Although the tenor of the speech was one of victory achieved, there were already signs of an insurgency developing. An estimated 3,000 civilians had been killed in the first three weeks of the war (although this figure was subsequently revised upwards) there were major problems of unexploded ordnance, especially cluster bomb sub-munitions, and there was rampant looting in the absence of any control of public order. What was of particular concern was that the US forces were hopelessly inadequate in terms of numbers to take control of the disorder and criminality, and most of the US troops had little or no training in such tasks, being focussed on combat roles.

At the same time, there were clear programmes being formulated for long-term US influence in Iraq as the Coalition Provisional Authority was established and plans were laid for the development of several large US military bases in strategically significant locations. There was to be little of no involvement of the United Nations in post-conflict reconstruction or aid for the development of political institutions – instead, US companies would oversee reconstruction, with Iraqi oil wealth being the main source of funding. It was also clear that the Iraqi economy would be developed in a very strongly orientated free market mode, with wholesale privatisation of state assets. One of the clearest indicators of this policy was the decision to appoint Dan Amstutz, a former senior executive of the world's biggest grain exporter, Cargill, to oversee the transformation of Iraqi agriculture. As the then Policy Director of Oxfam, Kevin Watkins, put it at the time: "Putting Dan Amstutz in charge of agricultural reconstruction is like putting Saddam Hussein in charge of a human rights commission".

The May 2003 briefing, *After the War*, attempted to sum up the situation in Iraq two months after regime termination:

> Overall, it is reasonable to say that the United States is in control of organised national political developments, is placing people in control of the two key aspects of the Iraqi economy, oil and agriculture, and is planning a long-term military presence. Whatever the approval of US forces for overthrowing Saddam Hussein, in Iraqi perceptions this very much has the look of replacing one regime with another. Moreover, the new regime, however it is formed, will be essentially seen as under the control of Washington which thereby gets to dominate the world's second largest reserves of oil, thereby increasing its "own" oil reserves by a factor of five.

Four years later, there has clearly been a political evolution within Iraq, with an elected parliament in session, but control of security is almost entirely down to well over 150,000 American forces and the Iraqi government is either unwilling or unable to undertake the political and legislative processes necessary to control the widespread sectarian violence. Moreover, an extensive insurgency has

developed which has produced a degree of chaos and disorder across much of central Iraq that has exceeded most of the worst predictions of recent years. Even in the south of the country, the British forces are now starting to be withdrawn, with the admission that they are adding to the problems as a focus for opposition. As they withdraw from Basra, power is now in the hands of competing militias rather than central Iraqi government authority – the withdrawal is effectively a retreat in the face of failure, although this is not how it can be represented for public consumption in Britain.

With a deteriorating security situation in Iraq in the latter part of 2006, the Baker-Hamilton Report in the United States recommended a phased withdrawal coupled with diplomatic overtures to Syria, Saudi Arabia and Tehran in order to try and minimise the evolution of sectarian conflict into a civil war. By the end of the year it was clear that the Bush administration had not accepted the report either in whole or in part. Instead, a "surge" in military deployments was planned to start in February of this year, with around 30,000 additional troops to be brought into Iraq over the four months to June. The emphasis would be on dispersing troops into combat outposts in the most insecure parts of Baghdad. Putting US troops into numerous small garrisons was a reversal of the previous policy of consolidation of forces in a small number of large and very well protected bases, but was seen as essential to countering an insurgency that was deeply rooted in local neighbourhoods. It would enable an engagement with local communities and thereby bring a degree of security to the city while progressively handing over to Iraqi government forces. This would work in parallel with the Iraqi government putting into place institutions and legislation designed to counter the trend towards greater sectarian confrontation.

The March 2007 briefing, *Iraqi Options and US Politics*, indicated that the surge was not yet having the effects expected, and the developments in the past month have tended to confirm this. During April, US forces lost 104 people killed and well over 500 wounded. While some parts of Baghdad became more peaceful, other parts were subject to intensive suicide bomb attacks. There was also evidence of insurgents moving their activities to other towns and cities away from Baghdad, reminiscent of the previous experience of major US operations. In the massive assault on Fallujah in November 2004, for example, the insurgency almost immediately re-focussed on the city of Mosul, necessitating rapid US troop reinforcements to the city to regain control.

A particular problem for the US troops deployed to small garrisons has been that insurgent groups have adapted to this by staging suicide bomb attacks against the garrisons. This has required the US units to put in strong fortifications and free-fire zones around the bases, making it much more difficult to engage with local communities. While this may enable US forces to defend the garrisons against truck bomb attacks, the insurgents have responded by adding armour to the trucks, requiring the US forces to deploy even tougher defensive measures, including anti-tank weapons, to the individual garrisons.

It will be early June before the surge is completed, but plans are already being made by the Department of Defense to deploy these much higher troop dispositions for up to a year. It is fair to say that the US military leadership in Iraq has been cautious about the possibilities of success, in marked contrast to many neo-conservative commentators in Washington. This caution is being amply justified and it is now probably fair to conclude that the surge strategy is going to be no more successful than previous initiatives. Moreover, there has been minimal political progress, with the Iraqi parliament even planning a two-month summer recess, just as the US surge strategy moves towards full implementation.

Afghanistan

The long-predicted Taliban spring offensive continues to evolve but not in the manner expected. Moreover, there have also been some positive developments in other parts of the country. In northern and western Afghanistan there have been some significant improvements in health care. According to the British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) review for April, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported some initial results of a health survey conducted by Johns Hopkins University that showed a

decline in infant mortality rates from 165 per 1,000 live births in 2001 to 135 per 1,000 in 2006. This is still a very high figure, in tune with others of the world's poorest countries, but the report also indicated an improvement in antenatal care for women from 5% in 2003 to 30% in 2006.

These particular indicators also support other evidence of some improvements in development potential, away from the rather artificial booming economy of Kabul, but they also tend to give a false picture of the overall situation. Across much of southern and south-eastern Afghanistan, the Taliban revival continues, with NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) conducting numerous high-profile operations in the areas of highest Taliban concentration. There have been indications of some Taliban reversals but these need to be treated with caution for two reasons. One is that April is one of the key months for harvesting opium poppies, and many paramilitaries concentrate on that activity. The other is that BAAG reports a substantial number of paramilitary attacks on Afghan government personnel, foreign aid workers and Afghan security forces. Close to 250 people were killed in such attacks during April alone, the indications being that paramilitary groups have tended to go for relatively "soft" targets.

Meanwhile, the overall reaction to the Taliban revival is taking two parallel directions. One is the marked tendency for the US forces to use heavy firepower against Taliban units, especially in the south-east of the country. These actions include military operations undertaken by US combat troops that are not part of the 37,000-strong ISAF force, and one of the results is a series of attacks that have killed many civilians, adding to the bitterness directed towards the US presence in particular.

The other direction involves the possibility of negotiating with Taliban and other militia elements. This was used on a local scale by some British ISAF units in Helmand Province last year, and has also been an approach sometimes employed by Canadian and Dutch troops, although it does run against the tactics of the US forces who regard any kind of negotiation with paramilitaries as unacceptable. Even so, the Karzai administration in Kabul is also tending to favour informal talks with paramilitary groups, partly on the grounds that the Taliban are, in reality, made up of a coalition of different outlooks. What the Karzai administration does insist on, however, is in dealing with paramilitary groups that are essentially Afghan rather than from a Pakistani background, and the administration remains deeply critical of the Pakistani government and what is perceived as interference in Afghanistan.

Although there are many uncertainties in Afghanistan, what is remarkable is the extent of insecurity in much of the country in contrast with expectations four or five years ago. It remains the case that the failure to provide an immediate peacekeeping and stabilisation force in 2001-02, coupled with the heavy military tactics subsequently used by US forces, allowed Taliban and other militia to regroup and acquire much public support. As a result, Afghanistan remains deeply insecure nearly six years after the original termination of the Taliban regime.

Al-Qaida

At the end of April, five men were convicted in London of a 2004 plan to detonate fertiliser-based explosives, possibly targeting gas supplies, shopping centres or a nightclub. There was concern that the British Security Service (MI5) had failed to follow up a connection between some of the men and two other men involved in the 7/7 London bombing the following year. There was, though, a wider concern that the al-Qaida movement as a whole, however loose and dispersed it might be, is undergoing a substantial revitalisation. There appear to be several elements to this. One is the absence of Pakistani government control of frontier districts in the west of the country, providing a safe haven for al-Qaida and other paramilitaries. Another is the rise of al-Qaida-linked groups in North Africa and yet another is the belief that radicalisation of Muslim groups in countries such as Britain (from Pakistan), France (from North Africa) and Germany (from Turkey) may be developing much faster than appreciated.

MI5 sources claim that the number of radical networks in Britain is growing exponentially, doubling every year since the start of the war in Iraq four years ago. The former head of MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, said last November that there were 1,600 active militants in Britain, a figure recently revised upwards to 2,000. MI5 itself is undergoing a remarkable expansion, almost doubling the number of officers by 2008, and it has also established a series of joint regional "hubs" with police forces. Both MI5 and the police are being given substantially more resources, and the situation in Britain, with the close links with Pakistan, is being watched closely by agencies in other European states.

One major difference between political attitudes in Britain and most other European countries is that the British government is wholly unwilling to admit any connection between the war in Iraq and Islamic radicalisation among a fortunately very small proportion of young Muslims in Britain. While there are many other factors involved, including the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine, the al-Jazeera effect of persistent coverage of civilian casualties and prisoner abuse, vigorous jihadist propagandising and a belief that Britain is inextricably linked to the "far enemy" of the United States, it is still the case that the Iraq War is a consistent cause of anger among many young Muslims. There is no possibility of a change in government outlook during the term of office of Mr Blair, but it is certainly possible that an incoming Gordon Brown administration will speed up the British withdrawal from Iraq and insert a certain distance between London and Washington on the wider conduct of the 'war on terror'. That in itself is unlikely to substantially diminish the risk of attacks in Britain, but it will certainly not make the situation worse.

Environmental Issues

The February briefing, *Environment and Development*, pointed to the interconnections between socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints, reporting on the most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). One of the features of that report was its relatively cautious assessment of the rate of change due to carbon emissions, an inevitable result of the need to maintain consensus from a very broad international perspective. The problem with that approach, whatever its advantages, is that it may underestimate the seriousness of the issue. Support for this view comes from a paper in the current issue of *Geophysical Research Letters*, assessing the rate of loss of Arctic sea ice. The 2007 IPCC report based estimates of this particular trend on an average of 18 climate change models, but actual measurements indicate that the rate of melting is about three times as fast as the IPCC report suggests. According to one of the authors, Julienne Stroeve of the University of Colorado, "We're about thirty years ahead of what the models show".

Most climate change studies now show that the rate of change is particularly high for the near-polar regions, much more so than for temperate or tropical environments. It is probable that the near-polar regions give us a strong early warning of global trends and the fact that the rate of ice melting is so much higher than predicted suggests that the whole process of global climate change is accelerating. If so, then talk of major cuts in carbon emissions to be achieved over a 40+ year time span are woefully inadequate. Much stronger political leadership, supported by a vigorous civil society, is going to be required very quickly indeed.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). See www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk for more information.
