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A THIRTY YEAR WAR?
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On 1 May 2003, President Bush made his speech on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, declaring that combat operations in Iraq were nearing an end. He did not use the phrase "mission accomplished", although the speech was delivered with that banner as a backdrop and it became known by that name. What was widely expected at that time was that Iraq would make a transition to a strongly pro-American state in the heart of the Middle East and there would be a long-term US military presence. The end result of the brief war would be enhanced American status in the Persian Gulf region.

At that time, a few analysts suggested otherwise, pointing to several features that might lead to a much longer conflict, possibly lasting thirty years. These included an insurgency that was already beginning to develop, and a sharp rise in anti-Americanism across the region. This was coupled with a potential revitalisation of the al-Qaida movement. Furthermore it was argued that the oil resources of the Persian Gulf were so important that the United States would regard it as essential to be the dominant military power in the region. This was not just in the aftermath of the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq but for many years to come. It would counter the developing power of any regional centres such as Tehran, but also looked to China and its own dependence on imported oil as a country likely to take an increasing interest in the region. Given that Gulf oil was likely to retain a global relevance for several decades, the idea of a thirty-year long conflict was at least plausible.

Although recent briefings in this series have attempted to stand back from immediate events in order to get a broader appreciation of developments in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is also appropriate to attempt an even more substantial overview in order to assess whether such an uncompromising analysis is still relevant. In doing so, it is first useful to examine recent developments.

The Progress of the Surge

The most recent change in the US military posture in Iraq has been the surge in forces, particularly in the greater Baghdad area. This started in February with the deployment of the first of five additional combat brigades and will be completed by early June. The intention is to increase security in Central Iraq, substantially curbing the insurgency while countering the sectarian conflict. The ultimate aim is to hand over to strengthened Iraqi security forces, especially the Army, with these supporting a more effective Iraqi government. A core aspect of the surge policy is to establish scores of combat outposts that effectively involve inserting US units into neighbourhoods, a pattern of deployment quite different from the previous consolidation into a few well-protected bases.

In the period from January to the end of May there were, according to US military sources, very heavy losses among the insurgents – over 3,000 killed and nearly 18,000 suspects detained. In the first few weeks of the surge there was an initial decrease in sectarian violence and even a decline in the rate of attacks on US forces. This may well have followed a pattern observed in previous smaller-scale US operations in cities and towns such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Tal Afar, where insurgents drew back in the face of US offensives, but re-grouped and developed new tactical responses. Four months into the surge, this has turned out to be the case – attacks on US forces have increased and there has also been a recent increase in sectarian violence. Furthermore, insurgents have developed new tactics, one being the use of much larger explosive devices against the more heavily armoured US vehicles and another involving the deployment of a twin suicide-bombing process in which one bomber destroys the outer defences of a combat outpost followed by a second bomber who attacks the post itself. There have also been incidents in which complex ambushes have been established. One tactic has been to use

concentrated firepower to shoot down a helicopter in a particular location of known US air patrols, while mining approach routes to the likely crash site to intercept rescue units.

One of the main impacts of the surge and the responses has been to make May one of the worst months for US casualties since the war began more than four years ago. During the course of the month, 126 US troops were killed and in the four weeks to 30 May over 600 were wounded. These were not the worst figures since the war began since casualties were higher in April and November 2004. In both those months, however, US forces were mounting short but highly intensive attacks on insurgent concentrations in Fallujah, whereas the May 2007 casualty rates followed a level of casualties that was almost as high in the previous month, a unique circumstance since the war began.

It was originally anticipated that an initial assessment of the progress of the surge would be made in September of this year. That may still be the case, but there were clear signals from Washington towards the end of the month that this would be little more than an interim assessment, with planning in progress for maintaining the increased numbers of troops for at least a year and possibly longer. Moreover, there are indications that there will even be further increases in combat and support troops that could take the overall deployment in Iraq to around 200,000 by the end of the year. Along with other forces in the region, this means a sustained presence of around a quarter of a million troops maintained by heavy reliance on reservists combined with extended periods of deployment for regular troops.

A Long Term Presence

While the Iraq War has become increasingly unpopular in the United States, the Democrats in Congress have been unable to develop a united front demanding an immediate withdrawal, with this making it easier for the Bush administration to maintain its current stance. What has been particularly interesting has been a series of statements from the administration and some military leaders implying a very long-term military commitment to Iraq in spite of the short-term predicament. In one sense, there are facts on the ground to support this – in Baghdad the new US Embassy is now nearing completion. This $592 million 21-building complex will include protected living accommodation for over 600 staff and desk space for 1,000. The Embassy will be the largest in the world, even though Iraq's population is less than half the size of France or Italy.

More generally, President Bush has recently gone on record as comparing the US intentions in Iraq with the half-century presence in South Korea. Critics of the administration suggest that this confirms suspicions first raised in April 2004 that the United States was planning permanent military bases in Iraq, but this is denied on the grounds that any presence would have to be agreed by an Iraqi government that could withdraw consent. At the same time, the thinking within the administration is that the long-term presence would move from the current high-level counterinsurgency posture to one of support. This would involve providing a final safeguard of security for the Iraqi administration, making it unlikely that any such administration would want a US withdrawal.

Following President Bush's South Korea analogy, supported by White House officials, similar sentiments were expressed by the Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, and by one of the senior commanders in Iraq, General Raymond Odierno. The expectation is that the long-term prospect for Iraq is of a country that can largely maintain internal security with its own forces, but this cannot be rigorously assured and there is therefore a requirement for a continuing US presence. Such a prospect is fully dependent on the defeat of the current insurgency, even if the likelihood of that is much diminished by the experience of recent months. What is important to recognise here, though, is the indefinite commitment to security in the region. At a time of intense difficulty within Iraq, when the US military predicament is as serious as it has ever been despite the increased troop numbers, the sights are still set on a decades-long presence.

The View from Elsewhere

One of the other significant developments in US politics has been a renewed attempt by the supporters of the war to portray opposition to the US presence as being almost entirely an al-Qaida operation. All insurgents are, by definition, terrorists, the insurgency is now largely a conflict with al-Qaida and the Iraq War is therefore the central focus of the entire long war against Islamofascism – the Fourth World War (with the Third World War having been the Cold War). In practice this is very far from reality, even if it does serve a political purpose in trying to retain domestic support for the war. At the same time, there is no doubt whatsoever that the Iraq War is extraordinarily advantageous to the al-Qaida movement, even if its supporters form only a part of the complex insurgency.

It has to be remembered that the al-Qaida movement is a dispersed and very broadly based phenomenon that is not narrowly hierarchical but does have clear aims and intentions. It is not a nihilistic collection of insane extremists, even if that impression is frequently given by opponents, but a rational movement involving an unusual combination of revolutionary political fervour rooted in a fundamentalist orientation of a major religion – Islam – rather than in a specific political ideology or nationalism. It has a series of short-term aims and one long-term objective. One of the former was the eviction of US military forces from Saudi Arabia, an aim the movement claimed to have achieved by 2005 when the last of the major US bases in the Kingdom was evacuated because of the concern of the Saudi authorities over the US presence. Others are the eviction of foreign forces from the Islamic world as a whole and the replacement of the House of Saud by a "genuine" Islamist regime, the Saudi royal family being seen as corrupt, elitist and excessively linked to the United States.

Further short-term aims are the replacement of other corrupt, elitist and pro-western regimes across the region, with an initial focus on Egypt and Pakistan but extending to Iraq and Afghanistan, together with support for other Islamist movements such as the Chechen rebels and the Southern Thailand separatists. Finally there is a deep antagonism to the state of Israel and support for the Palestinian cause. Beyond these aims lies the long-term intention of establishing a pan-Islamic Caliphate, developing in the Middle East but extending eventually to other parts of the world.

There is a broad distinction between the "near enemy" which comprises the unacceptable regimes and their supporters across the Middle East and the "far enemy", of the United States and its coalition partners such as the United Kingdom. A further core aspect of the strategy of the movement is the question of timescales. The short-term aims are seen as being achieved progressively over a period of several decades and the long-term aim of establishing Islamist governance through a Caliphate may take fifty to a hundred years. This is a fundamental issue as it differs so markedly from the typical timescales of western political and economic institutions.

To succeed in its aims the movement requires very substantial cadres of dedicated followers, the most important practical attributes being a range of abilities and experiences that are appropriate to the task of terminating the regimes of the near enemy. Many of the original paramilitary supporters of the movement gained such experience against poorly trained if heavily armed Soviet troops in 1980s Afghanistan and there may well have been a hope that the main US response to 9/11 would have been a new foreign occupation of the country, setting in process a lengthy guerrilla war. This would have held out the prospect of crippling a second superpower as well as of training new cadres of paramilitaries. US forces did not respond in that manner initially, relying heavily on the Northern Alliance to provide ground forces, but Afghanistan is progressively serving that role, not just for the United States but for NATO as a whole.

In any case, Afghanistan is now far less significant for the al-Qaida movement than Iraq. The immense value of the American occupation of Iraq is that it is providing a remarkably effective jihadist combat training zone for at least one and possibly two or three generations of paramilitaries. Moreover, this is

combat training that has three advantages over the Afghanistan of the 1980s. One is that it is training against the world's most heavily armed and best-equipped forces, the US Army and Marine Corps supported by the US Air Force and Navy. All of the weapons and equipment that could be brought to bear by the US military, often advised by Israeli Defence Force personnel, are being used. Up-armoured vehicles, the latest light arms, mortar detection radar, aerial and satellite-based reconnaissance, precision-guided munitions, area-impact weapons and everything else are all available.

The second advantage is that the Iraq War is primarily an urban guerrilla war and is therefore similar to the kinds of conflicts that the al-Qaida movement will want to conduct against other regimes of the near enemy in the region. This is far superior to the Afghanistan experience which was more rural in context. Finally, the Iraq War is being conducted in the glare of 24-hour TV news coverage by the new generation of stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. There is constant reporting of the civilian casualties at a level and with a detail that is foreign to the media outlets in Europe, let alone the United States.

From the perspective of the al-Qaida movement, Iraq is a quite unexpected bonus and is going to provide benefits that are likely to last for decades. It is for this reason that the recent indications from Washington of a very long-term presence in Iraq are so welcome to the movement. Although there have been many suggestions that the United States has had long-term plans for a military presence in Iraq since the start of the war four years ago, there have been as many denials. What the Bush administration has done, perhaps belatedly, is to be substantially more transparent about its aims and its deep-rooted belief in the enduring importance of the Iraq operation.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of all of this is the extraordinary lack of understanding within the Bush administration of the impact of its policies in Iraq. For the administration and its supporters, it is utterly reasonable that the United States should occupy Iraq and maintain a singularly powerful commitment there for as long as the region's resources are important. It is a legitimate defence of interests by the world's quintessential civilising power – the guardian of democracy and freedom and the defender against rampant Islamofascism.

There is simply no recognition that the view from across the Middle East, and indeed in large parts of the majority world, is of a form of overt imperialism backed up by the rigorous and uncompromising use of military force that has already resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people. For al-Qaida and its supporters, moreover, it is an assault on Islam which will greatly assist their aims. That, regrettably, will remain the case until there is a major reassessment in Washington. Given the divisions within the Democrats this does not seem immediately likely.

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