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## CHANGE IN PAKISTAN AND BRITAIN

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The last briefing put forward the argument that both the United States and the al-Qaida movement have motivations that transcend short-term issues in the war on terror and ensure that the current confrontation could last for some decades (*A Thirty Year War*, May 2007). From the US perspective, it is necessary to maintain a high degree of control over Iraq, given that neighbouring Iran is essentially an oppositional regime, the House of Saud has vulnerabilities and the Persian Gulf region is of immense importance because of its fossil fuel reserves. It would therefore take an extraordinary change in policy for the United States to consider a total withdrawal from Iraq. Even a change to a Democrat presidency in 2008 would not necessarily involve a fundamental shift, given that it may be exceedingly difficult to make the transition from military to civil engagement in the region.

In terms of the al-Qaida movement, there are several short and long-term aims, but even the short-term aims such as the termination of unacceptable regimes in the Middle East are measured in decades. Furthermore, the US occupation of Iraq is particularly valuable in that it provides a jihadist combat training zone that may well produce a generation or more of radical paramilitaries willing and able to engage in the pursuit of the movement's aims.

While this overall context is unchanged, there were a number of developments during the course of June that indicated the possibility of changes of direction. These included the standing down of Tony Blair as Prime Minister in Britain, attempted bomb attacks in London and the attack on Glasgow Airport, developments in the US military surge in Iraq, and an increase in violence in Afghanistan coupled with a possible change in strategy by the Pakistani government.

### Iraq

The substantial increase in US military forces in Iraq has been completed, with much of the emphasis being on much larger numbers of combat troops, as many as 30,000, in Baghdad. As earlier briefings have suggested, the surge was expected to lead to a decrease in sectarian conflict as well as limitations on the anti-occupation insurgency, but there were doubts as to whether this would be maintained. By the end of June, all of the extra troops were consolidated into the strategy of controlling Baghdad and then working out to surrounding districts, but the end of the month also saw three significant developments.

One was that the insurgents were able to maintain a high level of confrontation with their tactics changing to accommodate the increased numbers of US forces. These included a tendency to avoid open conflict where US forces had clear advantages in firepower. Although there has long been a tendency for the US Army and Marine Corps to make use of their extensive firepower support, the extent to which this has limited the insurgents has itself been minimised by the dispersed nature of US forces, rarely enough to maintain security in any one urban area. The more recent combination of added numbers as well as firepower has meant that control really could be maintained for relatively long periods.

The insurgent response has been to maintain a strategy of substantial suicide attacks, most commonly using car and truck bombs, with most of the attacks being directed at Iraqi targets. At the same time, heavy pressure has been maintained on the Green Zone in the centre of Baghdad, the substantial and heavily guarded area that houses the US military headquarters, the new US Embassy, the Iraqi Parliament and many ministries. Because of the urban concentrations around the Zone, it has been relatively easy for insurgents to conduct a series of mortar attacks into the Zone, thereby demonstrating a capability that may primarily be propagandistic since it suggests that the surge is failing.

In a more general sense there are other indications that the surge is yet to have a major impact, even though neo-conservative commentators in Washington are insistent that it must be given more time. During June, 540 corpses were recovered in Baghdad, many of them showing signs of torture and mutilation and many presumed to be a result of sectarian conflict. While this was less than typical monthly figures for a year ago, it marked a substantial increase in the numbers for February through to April when the surge appeared initially to be having a controlling effect. It is also the case, though, that overall, civilian casualties across the country were lower than in May, even though they were still averaging 300 a week. For the US forces, June was the third month in a row that the military death toll exceeded 100, by far the worst three month period since the war began. The numbers wounded were also particularly high, with 400 wounded in the two weeks to 27 June alone.

The second development in Iraq was a progressive consolidation within the insurgency towards an Islamist outlook. Some commentators in the United States have long maintained that the insurgency in Iraq was essentially an al-Qaida terrorist operation. This approach had the political advantage for the Bush administration that it linked the unpopular war in Iraq with the necessary response to the original 9/11 attacks, even if it was a gross oversimplification of the actual nature of the insurgency. In practice, the neo-Ba'athist and nationalist elements were the strongest, with foreign jihadist paramilitaries probably numbering no more than 1 in 10 of the insurgents.

In the past year or so, the Islamist element has undoubtedly strengthened, with some towns and cities under insurgent influence making a transition to a more austere society. Even so, this does not mean that the transnational al-Qaida movement is controlling the insurgency, more that it is evolving into an operation that fits in rather more with al-Qaida's wider aims rather than developing almost entirely within the Iraqi national context.

The final development in relation to the Iraq War is the impact of the Democrat control of Congress, now that this has become embedded since the elections of last November. Most Democrats are still reluctant to call for a wholesale withdrawal from Iraq, not least because of accusations of unpatriotic behaviour. The problem for the Bush administration, though, is that some prominent Republicans are increasingly opposing current policies in Iraq. This makes it easier for Democrats to be critical while avoiding accusations over their patriotism, and it means that the much-discussed review of the surge strategy planned for September could be an occasion for an intense national discussion over the future of US policy in Iraq.

While this may be the outcome, it will be conducted in the context of recent developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has received relatively little media attention in the United States but there are clear indications that what is happening there, and in Pakistan, may become much more high profile in the United States in the coming months.

### Afghanistan

While many analysts anticipated a substantial Taliban offensive during the early summer, this has not materialised in the manner expected, yet the levels of insecurity in Afghanistan have increased because of other developments. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has reported successes when engaged in substantial military operations against concentrations of Taliban and other militia, mainly because in such circumstances it has been able to bring its overwhelming firepower advantages to bear. It is almost certainly as a result of this that Taliban tactics have changed, being much more directed at numerous smaller scale actions and less direct engagement with ISAF units. Even though ISAF sources do claim some successes, it is much less clear that they are able to hold particular districts following attacks on the militias, as there is a persistent tendency for militia groups to melt away in the face of direct force and return later. To maintain security would require forces that are massively larger than those available to NATO and, as a result, many of NATO's advances tend to be temporary.

This is against a background of a general increase in insecurity, with the International Committee of the Red Cross reporting that Afghanistan is less secure than at any time in the ICRC's 20-year presence in the country. This is confirmed by the monthly surveys published by the British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG), with these demonstrating some of the changes in Taliban tactics and the consequences both of these changes and of ISAF actions.

A persistent Taliban trend has been to target members of the Afghan police, together with police trainers and relatives. During the course of June, BAAG reported at least 83 such people killed in numerous individual attacks. The worst of these was the destruction of a bus outside the Kabul Police headquarters that was taking police instructors to the Police Academy. 35 people were killed, most of them instructors, but the casualties included a number of passers-by. In other attacks, the wife, two sons and a nephew of a police commander in Ghazni Province were killed in an attack on his home and the son of a police commander in Helmand Province was abducted and beheaded. These three instances were among eleven attacks carried out during June, with many others directed at aid workers, government officials and ISAF forces. One of the worst in the whole month was on 15 June in Tarin Kot, the capital of Uruzgan Province in Southern Afghanistan. In the incident, a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb among a group of children talking to a group of ISAF soldiers. At least eleven children were killed as well as several ISAF personnel.

In addition to the police and civilian deaths resulting from insurgent activity, one of the most controversial aspects of ISAF operations has been the use of airpower against presumed Taliban targets that have resulted in civilian casualties. There has been a substantial increase in such casualties, even if precise figures are difficult to obtain. According to BAAG, indicative figures from Human Rights Watch suggested that at least 230 civilians had been killed by international forces in 2006, with the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan estimating over 200 civilians killed during the first five months of 2007 alone, although these figures did include deaths due to actions by Afghan security forces. One of the worst incidents, right at the end of June, was a coalition air-strike in Helmand Province that killed between 50 and 80 civilians.

### Pakistan

The continuing loss of civilian life in Afghanistan due to coalition action has increased the mood of anti-Americanism and has also tended to undermine the limited authority of the Karzai administration. From an American perspective, though, the abilities of the Taliban militia to maintain their activities have been much aided by the freedom which they continue to have in the districts of Pakistan that border Afghanistan, especially North and South Waziristan, where the Pakistani Army has virtually no influence, still less control. Past US military actions in north western Pakistan, including attacks by armed drones, have resulted in bitter responses, especially from Islamist elements, and the Musharraf regime has had to try and balance support for US operations with the recognition of vigorous and potentially destabilising domestic opinion. While the United States does have many military connections with the country, the Musharraf regime has sought to limit the extent of US operations, particularly "hot pursuit" operations across the border.

At the end of June, normally well-informed sources in Islamabad were indicating that the Musharraf regime was now prepared to allow a much higher level of US activity, possibly included air strikes on Pakistani territory. If this does turn out to be the case, it will be one of the most significant developments in South West Asia in recent years. It might possibly weaken aspects of the al-Qaida/Taliban activities, but the cost could be many civilian deaths through collateral damage followed by more recruitment into the ranks of the militants as well as a distinct threat to the stability of the Pakistani government.

## Britain

In Britain, the end of the month saw an attempted double car-bombing in the theatre district of London when two Mercedes saloons packed with petrol, gas canisters and nails failed to explode. A day later an attempt to target the passenger terminal at Glasgow Airport also failed although the vehicle caught fire at the terminal entrance and one of those inside was badly burned. Although there have been several prominent court cases and a number of arrests in connection with other presumed bomb plots, this was the first occasion since the 7/7 bombings in 2005 when devices had actually been set to detonate.

The attempt coincided with Gordon Brown taking office as Prime Minister, with the tone of government ministers responding to the bombing attempt being different to that of the previous Blair administration. The overall response placed more emphasis on the criminality of the intended acts, with little use of terms such as "war on terror", and the avoidance of immediate proposals for changes in the law. The new Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, made a House of Commons statement which combined a low-key approach with a sense of authority.

It is possible that this signals the beginnings of a change in orientation by the new Brown administration, another possible indicator being the appointment of David Miliband as Foreign Secretary, given his somewhat critical approach to previous policies on Iraq and also the Israeli actions in Lebanon. The appointment of John Denham to the Cabinet may also be significant, bearing in mind his decision to resign as a junior minister in 2003 over the Iraq War.

There are thus some signs of an opening up of the political debate in Britain over the nature of the war on terror. The real marker for this will be the evolution of policy towards Iraq, especially the rate at which British forces will be withdrawn from the Basra area. It is now clear that a majority of all the military forces will have left Iraq by early 2008. Given that military control of Basra itself is now completely unrealistic, the real marker will be whether a small British force, of perhaps 2,000 troops, will remain in Iraq for the secondary if symbolic purpose of guarding supply routes from South East Iraq towards Baghdad. This would involve a much lesser task in terms of urban counter-insurgency and would probably be militarily feasible. From the Bush administration's point of view it would have the much more important political function of enabling the administration to claim there was still an international coalition functioning in Iraq. Without a continuing British presence there would be little left of the coalition. Thus the political decision by the Brown government as to whether to retain this presence will be the real indicator of its intended relationship with the Bush administration in the remaining eighteen months of this US Presidency.

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