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IRAQ AFTER THE SURGE

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In late 2006 the Baker-Hamilton Report recommended a change of policy for the Bush Administration over Iraq. The two main proposals were that the United States should work towards a large-scale military withdrawal from the country and that it should do so in parallel with an engagement with regional powers to ensure that a post-withdrawal Iraq would not degenerate into wholesale violence and civil war. Such a diplomatic engagement would necessarily include countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

One of the assumptions behind this approach is that significant regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have an interest in avoiding a failed state riven with violence on their borders. Although Saudi Arabia is concerned at the risk of enhanced Iranian influence in a post-occupation Iraq, it has a substantial Shi'a minority within its own population, especially in the oil-bearing regions in the east of the country. Protracted violence in Iraq could well have an effect within the Kingdom. Similarly, Iran has a large Arab minority in the west of the country close to Iraq and would not want to see sustained internal conflict in Iraq because of the potential for increased dissent in its own country.

The Baker-Hamilton Report was roundly criticised in neoconservative quarters for being akin to surrender, and the Bush Administration decided quickly to reject most of its recommendations. Instead, it adopted a policy which was essentially a process of reinforcement of the military occupation, combined with the appointment of a new military commander in Iraq – General David Petraeus. The reinforcement, known as "the surge" would commence early in 2007 and there would be a review of progress in September.

The Nature of the Surge

The essence of the surge was the addition of five combat brigades to the forces in Iraq. Each brigade numbered about 4,500 troops and with additional support elements this amounted to an increase in US troop numbers in the country of 30,000 taking the total to about 168,000, the largest number since the start of the war in March 2003. The main intention was to increase the military presence in Baghdad in order to control the insurgency and the sectarian violence there, moving on later to the other centres of the insurgency in the provinces to the north and west of the city. The addition of the troops was phased in between February and June, at the rate of one additional brigade each month. This meant that the new troop dispositions would have been available for three months before the September review.

Prior to the surge, there had been a tendency for US troops to be centred on a small number of large and well-protected bases. While there were frequent ground patrols, there was also a heavy reliance on air power, both in the form of helicopter gunships and also fixed-wing strike aircraft. Given the overwhelming firepower available to the US forces, there were frequent incidents of heavy civilian casualties as US forces engaged insurgents in densely populated urban environments. Apart from the direct human consequences, this meant that US forces had relatively little direct engagement with ordinary Iraqis.

As the surge developed, the additional combat forces enabled US military commanders to increase the number of ground patrols and to establish a substantial number of small combat support posts, especially in Baghdad. This was expected to increase the scope for engagement with Iraqi communities, although an additional tactic in the Baghdad area was to erect barriers between neighbourhoods subject to sectarian attack.

The greater engagement with insurgents resulted in very large numbers of people being killed or detained as suspects. US sources indicated over 3,000 killed and nearly 18,000 detained in the period from January to the end of May (see May briefing, *A Thirty Year War?*), but there were also substantial increases in US military casualties with over 300 killed and 1,800 wounded in the period April to June, the worst three month period since the war began. By August, there was evidence that the security situation in Baghdad had eased somewhat, and there were also some indications that Sunni groups in provinces to the north and west of Baghdad were becoming more antagonistic to the insurgents linked to the al-Qaida movement.

At the same time, political progress in Iraq was almost entirely lacking, even though one of the main aims of the surge was to improve security sufficiently for political progress to have a more realistic chance of success. Furthermore, as violence tended to decrease in Baghdad, there were major problems elsewhere in the country, including a British troop withdrawal from a base in Central Basra that had become one of the most dangerous locations in the country. Even so, in the United States much was made by the Bush administration of the importance of the Sunni antagonism to al-Qaida elements, even if it involved closer cooperation between US troops and Sunnis who remained opposed to the US presence.

One of the main themes of the Bush administration in recent months has been the strength of the al-Qaida movement in Iraq, an advantage of stressing this linkage being the manner in which it connects the Iraq War with responding to the original 9/11 attacks. In parallel with this has been the emphasis on Iranian involvement in the insurgency. Thus, two enemies are seen at the root of the problem facing US forces in Iraq – al-Qaida and Iran. Given the long-standing antagonisms between the United States and Iran, going right back to the fall of the Shah, the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis, this means that the focus of the war in Iraq can be presented as dealing with what are seen in the eyes of the Bush administration as the two main enemies of the United States worldwide.

The reality on the ground in Iraq is that al-Qaida is not the dominant force in the insurgency since the main elements are Iraqi nationalist Sunni militias and separate Shi'a militias. Moreover, while there are links between the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and some Shi'a militias, the most important of the latter is Moqtada al'Sadr's Mehdi Army, which has relatively loose links with Tehran.

Nevertheless, this focus is being maintained by the Bush administration and is combined with strong statements to the effect that the surge is working sufficiently well for it to be utterly wrong to talk of wholesale withdrawal. President Bush has even made the connection between Iraq and Vietnam, seeming to suggest that the US withdrawal from Vietnam was premature and even implying that the Vietnam War could have been won if the United States had stayed the course. This is a view which is common enough in neoconservative circles and reinforces the very strongly held view that any talk of withdrawal from Iraq is hugely dangerous as well as deeply unpatriotic.

The Domestic Context

The November 2006 elections gave the Democrats control of both Houses of Congress but this has not resulted in the development of a single consistent line on Iraq. In common with the Republicans, and as an enduring feature of US politics, the Democrats themselves are a coalition of outlooks and nowhere is this more clear than in terms of policy options for Iraq. While many elements within the party favour an early disengagement, it is also the case that they are concerned as to the consequences, especially in terms of the patriotism issue. However, two aspects of the current American political scene suggest that the autumn period in Congress may be particularly difficult for the embattled Bush administration.

The first of these is that the vacation period has given members of the House and Senate a good opportunity to engage with their electorates. For many Democrats this will reinforce for them just how

unpopular the war has become and this will have an effect on their work back in Washington. The second element relates directly to this. By taking control of both Houses of Congress, the Democrats have a much greater opportunity to set the agenda in terms of numerous hearings relating to the conduct of the Iraq War. These give them the opportunity to question in detail many officials, including senior military commanders.

Even more significant is the manner in which a range of committees can engage in examinations of the conduct of the war over the past four years. The issues for such hearings, whether they be matters such as prisoner abuse, rendition, provision of equipment for the armed forces, the use of private security contractors or the major issue of the control of expenditure, can all be examined at length, with the agendas being set by Democrats rather than Republicans. Since the committees have a much higher standing in political and media circles than, for example, British select committees, this means that a wide range of aspects of the war will get attention that has so far been largely lacking.

The Issue of Iran

The Bush administration faces major problems in Iraq, even if it attempts to portray some progress, yet one of the surprising features of recent weeks has been the manner in which Iran has risen up the political agenda once more, for the first time since the early part of the year when there was a previous focus on the possibility of a military confrontation. As well as the issue of Iranian involvement in Iraq, three other factors are relevant. One of these is that the United States Navy and Marine Corps have been maintaining higher levels of forces in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea in recent months than at any time since early 2003. The previous pattern for much of that time was for a full aircraft carrier battle group to be deployed with the US Fifth Fleet, which is headquartered in Bahrain, together with an Amphibious Strike Group which included several thousand Marines. Since the spring, this has been roughly doubled in size. There are some variations in numbers, and rotation of units means that it is regularly possible to have as many as three carrier battle groups available in the wider region.

The second factor is a notably harsher rhetoric coming from the Bush administration towards Iran, with both President Bush and Vice-President Cheney being adamant about the wholly unacceptable nature of the Iranian regime of President Ahmadinejad. The issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions remains important, but US opposition to this is not aided by the relatively good cooperation that the International Atomic Energy Agency is receiving from the Iranian government. A consequence of this is that the United States would face opposition in the UN Security Council from China and Russia if efforts were made to increase the sanctions used against Iran. Perhaps as a result of this, the Bush administration tends to make much more of the Iranian involvement in Iraq as being the real focus of US opposition to Tehran.

The final factor is much less clear-cut – the extent to which informal indications of a US military preparedness for action against Iran have come to the fore, often by way of blogs and other means. It is essential to be very cautious about these sources of information, given that the web has proved a boon to conspiracy theorists. Even so, there has been a marked increase in indications of a more belligerent attitude.

What also has to be born in mind is that the strong US rhetoric on Iran is singularly useful for the Ahmadinejad government. There are serious economic problems affecting the country, with many of them affecting the poorer sectors of the population that were largely responsible for Ahmadinejad's surprising election in 2005. The decrease in his own popularity is reflected in the poor performance of associates in municipal elections earlier in the summer and it is therefore to his advantage that Iran is facing such an antagonistic mood in Washington.

In this context, President Ahmadinejad claimed at the end of August that Iran already had cascades of 3,000 uranium enrichment centrifuges in working order. Although such an assertion was doubted by the

IAEA, the more hawkish elements in Washington could concentrate on this as evidence of an imminent Iranian ability to construct a crude nuclear device.

What is particularly difficult to assess is whether there really is a mood in the United States for military action against Iran at any time before the end of the Bush administration next year. There are undoubtedly elements close to the White House that regard it as essential that the Iranian nuclear programme be curtailed by a military operation within that time frame. There is also a view that the parallel targeting of Iranian Revolutionary Guard units would limit Iran's capacity to retaliate by intervening in Iraq. Against that, there are influential elements in the State Department and even the Pentagon that would regard any military attacks on Iran as foolhardy and dangerously counterproductive.

Two factors have to be added to this. The first is that a Bush administration facing major difficulties in Congress and continuing problems in Iraq and Afghanistan might see an Iran crisis as a valuable political diversion. At the very least, an even stronger political rhetoric against Iran than is currently employed might have substantial domestic value, even if a military operation was not actually imminent. The second is that the Ahmadinejad regime in Tehran might positively welcome a confrontation, and associated hard-line elements with the Revolutionary Guard might even carry out provocations designed deliberately to incite a US response. The basic issue is that two governments are in some trouble with their domestic constituents and each may well be looking for an external diversion. That is not a circumstance that induces stability.

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