

International Security Monthly Briefing – December 2007

## CHANGE – FROM IRAQ THROUGH TO PAKISTAN

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In four countries, from Iraq to Iran and on to Afghanistan and Pakistan, there were major developments in December 2007, all with consequences for the future of George Bush's war on terror. All, furthermore, were relevant to the developing contest in the United States over the nominations for the 2008 Presidential Election.

### Iraq

There was some decline in the levels of violence in Iraq, a trend that had become apparent since October. Most noticeable was the decrease in US military casualties across much of the country, a decline in civilian casualties in Baghdad and adjacent provinces, and the return of some thousands of refugees to their former homes. In the United States, the Bush administration and its supporters attributed this to a combination of a short-term surge in US troop numbers, combined with a more intelligent approach to counterinsurgency operations.

One effect of the marked decrease in US military casualties was some easing of the pressures on the Bush administration within the United States over the conduct of the Iraq War. This, in turn, meant that the calls from Democrats in the House and Senate for an early withdrawal of forces became muted. Moreover, some neoconservative commentators were going as far as to say that the al-Qaida elements in Iraq were facing wholesale defeat and an enduring victory over the insurgents was now achievable.

The changes in Baghdad and central Iraq have certainly been marked, but there are many reasons for caution, not least because of the many occasions since March 2003 when victory has been claimed as imminent. Following President Bush's "mission accomplished" speech in May of that year, within three weeks of the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime, there have been frequent declarations of success. They include the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein in July 2003, the belief two months later that the insurgency was down to a handful of extended families that were under surveillance, the capture of Saddam Hussein in December of that year, the winding up of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the handover to an appointed Iraqi administration, the assault on Fallujah in November 2004, and the anticipated effects of a number of local and national elections. In all cases, the insurgency was expected to ebb away, but in no instance did this happen.

Prior to the surge earlier in 2007, there were persistent claims that the insurgency was being conducted almost entirely by adherents to the al-Qaida movement or "AQI" (al-Qaida in Iraq) as it was called. With a decrease in casualties and violence, the developments in November and December have therefore been hailed as an important victory over a key element of the al-Qaida movement. In practice there are, once again, grounds for caution.

For most of the past two years, the majority of the attacks on US forces have actually been conducted by Shi'a militias, with no connection with AQI elements. Even among the Sunni militias, many elements have been neo-Ba'athists or nationalists rather than al-Qaida supporters. Where there has been a curbing of AQI elements, this has been achieved partly by arming some Sunni elements opposed to al-Qaida, collectively termed "the Awakening" by US sources. One effect of this, though, is to provide armaments and training for Sunni militias that have the longer-term aims of ensuring an end to US occupation and subsequent security for Sunni communities in an Iraq that will have a natural Shi'a majority.

A complicating issue has been that towards the end of December there was a clear trend of targeting Sunni militias within the Awakening by insurgents, including the assassination of some key leaders. Furthermore, the arming of Sunni militias has had the major consequence of instilling considerable unease among Shi'a politicians at a time when political developments in the country are moribund. One of the two main Shi'a militia groups, the Mehdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr, has been largely observing a cease-fire for some months but there is no consensus as to whether, or for how long, this will last.

Furthermore, the past experience in Iraq has been that surges in US military activity have been accompanied by the temporary withdrawal of guerrilla militias from combat, or the moving of their zones of operation to parts of Iraq away from major US troop concentrations. There was certainly evidence of this in November and December, with an increase in violence in some of the provinces away from Baghdad such as Nineva.

All these factors suggest that considerable caution should be exercised in assuming that the United States is succeeding in achieving lasting progress, from its perspective, in the country. While an easing of the very high levels of violence is greatly welcome, it is far too early to conclude that it will be permanent. It is worth noting, for example, that the British withdrawal from Basra may have cut back UK casualties markedly, but there are numerous indications that what has been left behind is a major city that is being fought over by contending militia groups. The British aim of enabling the city of Basra to achieve a stable peace has been singularly unsuccessful.

## Iran

Concerning Iran, the most significant development in December was the release of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in Washington that downplayed the significance of the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons. Such estimates represent a consensus view of all the main US security and intelligence organisations, and this NIE concluded that Iran had probably halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003. This was a markedly different assessment compared with earlier analyses and was a major surprise for the Bush administration at a time when it was seeking greatly strengthened international sanctions against Iran.

The NIE conclusion was broadly similar to the results of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency during 2007, but its real impact was to diminish the possibility of international action against Iran through the UN Security Council. China has long been unwilling to entertain such action, not least because of its close links with Tehran over the future supply of oil and natural gas. While Russia does not have such a dependency, it also favours close relations with Iran as part of its policy of increasing its influence in the Middle East and South West Asia. One significant development in this regard was the decision of the Putin government to commence the export of reactor-grade uranium to fuel the new nuclear power station at Bushehr on the Persian Gulf coast.

While the National Intelligence Estimate posed difficulties for the Bush administration, it was also a problem for the Ahmadinejad regime in Tehran. The regime has lost much of its domestic support over the past two years as it has failed to deliver substantial economic progress to the poorer sectors of Iranian society. Such people formed the basis of Ahmadinejad's unexpected victory in the 2005 presidential election contest with Hashemi Rafsanjani, and there were high expectations that the new administration would direct more assistance to the poor. In spite of high oil revenues this has not happened, resulting in increasing regime unpopularity.

In such circumstances it has been consistently useful for the Ahmadinejad government to point to the antagonism of the Bush administration towards Iran as a means of unifying support for the government against an external foe. The NIE report makes this more difficult since the Bush administration has found its claims about Iranian nuclear ambitions undermined.

As well as the Ahmadinejad government finding the diminution of an external enemy problematic, this also applies to the Revolutionary Guard. As discussed in the October briefing in this series (*Drift to War*), there is a risk that radical elements within the Guard will seek to provoke a confrontation with the United States in order to raise their diminished status within Iranian society. This risk may be heightened, not lessened, by the consequences of the NIE assessment.

## Afghanistan

During the course of December there were extensive media reports in Britain of substantial military operations against Taliban elements in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan. An impression was given of substantial successes for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) but this was highly misleading. Within the Pentagon there has been considerable concern that many member states have been thoroughly inadequate in their commitment to the ISAF operation, either through a refusal to deploy troops or substantial limitations on the uses to which units could be put. Countries such as Germany and France have forces in Afghanistan, but these are limited to training and stabilisation roles away from the main areas of conflict.

Apart from the United States, it is Britain and Canada that have been the main countries involved in the insecure southern provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar. The domestic support for Canadian forces is not strong and the deployments may not be maintained beyond the end of this year. The British forces are fairly secure at present, not least because the rapid drawdown of British troops in south-eastern Iraq means that operations across the region have less domestic opposition. Indeed, the British forces being deployed in Afghanistan in the first few months of 2008 are the largest so far, including most of the elite Parachute Regiment, together with aircraft reinforcements including the Typhoon Eurofighter.

This commitment has made it easier for the Brown government in London to maintain a reasonable relationship with the Bush administration in spite of the Iraq withdrawals, but it does little to diminish the Pentagon's overarching concern about wider NATO attitudes. At a difficult NATO meeting in Scotland in December, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, sought to put pressure on other member states to increase their commitments in Afghanistan, but with virtually no success. As a consequence, there are fears of a further Taliban resurgence in the spring and summer of 2008.

As of late December 2007, the total foreign forces in Afghanistan excluding private military contractors stood at 51,000. Around 25,000 of these were non-US NATO forces committed to ISAF, 15,000 of the US forces were under NATO command and 11,000 under separate US command. The total foreign troop numbers are the highest in the six years of the war and it is difficult to see how they will increase unless the United States deploys more troops in the coming months.

## Pakistan

Much of the concern with developments in Afghanistan in the latter half of 2007 related to a marked increase in paramilitary activity in western Pakistan. Militias related both to Taliban and al-Qaida elements increased their influence in districts such as North and South Waziristan, diminishing the influence of the Pakistani Army and ensuring secure training facilities for paramilitaries as well as secure supply routes through to Afghanistan.

In these circumstances, United States policy in Pakistan was to support the Pervaz Musharraf regime while pressurising General Musharraf to give up his leadership of the Army. While this was eventually achieved, the problem remained that his own unpopularity across most sectors of Pakistani opinion was such that he could not be seen as a dependable and secure ally. As a result, Washington's planning developed into the option of favouring elections that would likely result in Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party being the largest party in the parliament. What was anticipated was that she would then form a coalition with Mr Musharraf with herself as Prime Minister and him as President. This would,

however, have some problematic elements in that the constitution allows the President the greater powers whereas Benazir Bhutto would almost certainly have much more public support.

In the event, the anticipated move towards elections was hindered by Mr Musharraf's calling of a state of emergency in November and the detention of many opponents, primarily in response to a crisis involving the legal community and his accession to the Presidency. During the course of December, the sense of crisis eased somewhat, the state of emergency was lifted, many of the political prisoners were released and parliamentary elections were scheduled for early January.

The way was therefore clear, once more, for a potentially pro-American government with some degree of popular support, provided always that Benazir Bhutto was prepared to support more strident action against the Islamist radicals close to the Afghanistan border. From the Bush administration's perspective, provided this proved to be the case, then there was some prospect of a curbing of Taliban and al-Qaida activity in the "safe zones" of western Pakistan, giving greater potential for isolating and defeating Taliban militias in Afghanistan.

It was in this context that the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on 27 December was so disastrous for the United States. In her absence, the Pakistan Peoples Party had no other leader of remotely similar stature, whatever the previous PPP history of corruption and misgovernment. Whoever was responsible for the murder, it is heralding a period of instability and political uncertainty in Pakistan just at a time when radical Islamists in the west of the country are becoming more powerful in their seeking precisely such instability.

#### US Domestic Politics

In one sense, therefore, the whole 'war on terror' has moved eastwards from Iraq through to Afghanistan and Pakistan. This does not in any way mean that Iraq is no longer significant, since it will retain a substantial value to the al-Qaida movement as long as US forces remain in occupation. What it does mean, though, is that 2007 ended on a very positive note for the al-Qaida movement, even if this was hardly recognised in the United States.

As outlined earlier in this briefing, one consequence of the decrease in US military casualties in Iraq in the last three months of 2007 was that the Iraq War declined as a political issue within the US just as the 2008 Presidential Election campaign was getting under way. Since there was far less of a domestic media focus on developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this meant that the conduct of the Bush administration's overall war on terror was less of a matter of debate.

As we move into 2008, it is still possible that security in Iraq will re-emerge as an issue. What is even more likely is that Afghanistan and Pakistan will move much more centre stage, with South West Asia become a much more substantial issue for the American public, as well as for the region itself.

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