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'Iraq – Liberation or Occupation?'

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A month ago, at the beginning of June, there were already indications that the United States and Britain were facing serious paramilitary opposition in Iraq. On 1 May, President Bush had made a rousing and widely-reported speech aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* declaring the war to be over, but an increasing incidence of attacks on US troops within days of his speech indicated otherwise.

Two months after his speech, it now looks wildly optimistic, seeming to represent a basic failure to understand what is happening in much of Iraq. Since that speech, 32 British and US military personnel have been killed and over 200 wounded and, in the 45 days through to 4 July, there were almost 600 attacks on occupation forces. Most of the attacks have been concentrated in Central Iraq, principally in Baghdad itself and the towns and cities to the north and west of the capital, but there have also been attacks close to the Syrian border and against British troops in the South East of the country.

Even so, the rhetoric of the US leadership remains directed at minimising the problem, with the head of the reconstruction effort in Iraq, Paul Bremer, describing the opposition as stemming from “Those few remaining individuals who have refused to fit in to the new Iraq and are becoming more and more desperate.” He further said that “They are alienating the rest of the population”.

This contrasts markedly with press reports of an increase in the anti-American mood, and also with the decision of the US administration to offer massive rewards for the capture or proven death of Saddam Hussein and his sons. The very fact that such a reward is being offered raises the question of whether the current opposition to the occupation is centred almost entirely on the old Ba’ath leadership or whether something wider is beginning to emerge.

It is not an easy question to answer, but there are several pointers that may help. One of these is that there has almost certainly been a considerable impact on communities in and around Baghdad that results from the extent of the casualties during the intense three-week phase of the war earlier in the year. This was discussed in the O.R.G. *International Security Briefing* in May, but the casualty figures given then have had to be revised upwards, with the probability of over 6,000 civilians killed, together with at least twice that number of soldier. Taken with tens of thousands of injuries, and given that most of those affected came from the Sunni areas of Central Iraq, this means that very large numbers of people will have personal knowledge of people killed or injured in what was stated to be a war of liberation.

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A second issue is that the level of opposition to US forces is having a substantial effect on the troops themselves. Not only are they patrolling with full body armour and in armoured vehicles, very much as an occupying power, but the casualties they are taking makes them very nervous. This is compounded by the intense summer heat and by the expectation of many of them that they would have been back home on extended leave long before now.

The effect of all of this is that their attitudes and conduct both tend to be assertive if not aggressive, leading to vigorous house searches, frequent detentions of large numbers of suspects, and even inadvertent shootings of bystanders, all resulting in an even greater feeling of resentment.

This, in turn, is exacerbated by the failure of the occupation forces to restore many of the public services, the moribund nature of the economy and consequent high unemployment in what is a generally educated population, and a lack of any significant progress towards democracy.

Problems with public services lead on to a closely allied issue – the development of a widespread problem of sabotage by dissident elements that is making the process of reconstruction even more difficult in a situation where the Iraqi infrastructure was already crumbling after 12 years of sanctions.

At the root of all this lies the question of where the opposition is coming from and whether it is increasing in intensity. What is now clear is that a large proportion of all of the elite forces of the old regime survived the war. While the general Republican Guard experienced very high casualties in the US bombardments south of Baghdad, the Special Republican Guard was hardly involved in this key part of the war. They, and the various armed units associated with the regime's security and intelligence agencies essentially offered none of the expected resistance in Baghdad but appear to have melted away with large quantities of weapons and munitions intact.

Since we are talking about up to 40,000 well-trained people, it does not make sense to describe these as “remnants”. Moreover, as the anti-occupation insurgency develops, it looks increasingly as though many of these paramilitaries will be receiving substantial support from their own populations. How far this will develop is at the core of the dilemma for the coalition.

One view from the coalition, widely expressed, is that the Ba’athis elements behind the current upsurge in attacks are maintaining support out of fear, including the fear that the regime will return in some form. If that is indeed the case, then the insurgents will not have the genuine support of substantial sectors of the population and it may be possible to counter their effects through a range of counter-insurgency measures. If, on the other hand, there is genuine and widespread antagonism to the US occupation, then we may be at the start of a sustained insurgency.

What is the answer to this? It is complicated by three factors. One is that part of the insurgency is engaging in sabotage of public utilities as a deliberate policy of making

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reconstruction more difficult, thereby increasing the unpopularity of the occupiers. A second is that it is almost impossible for an occupying power to "win hearts and minds" while simultaneously conducting a vigorous campaign to kill or capture insurgents.

The third factor is the United States military is singularly ill-equipped for such a mission, not just because of its concern over the domestic political impact of casualties, but more because it simply does not embrace a culture of peace-building as part of its operational outlook.

Put another way, this means that if those forces opposed to US occupation set out in a single-minded way to encourage US forces to be highly aggressive in their counter-insurgency, then there is a real possibility that the insurgents will end up with substantial popular support, even if many of them have their origins in the old and brutal Ba'athist regime. We are therefore left with the extraordinary irony that a short but bitter war that deposed a highly autocratic and feared regime could, in its aftermath, lead to a wider degree of support for Ba'athism than was present before the war.

Whether that happens, there is already a more general development that has considerable implications for US policy in the region and in the wider world. As the June *Briefing* discussed, two of the main developments in the Bush administration's security have been the move towards pre-emptive action against perceived threats, and the desire to be able to act globally and with very rapid effect.

The global capability does not necessarily involve large bases in every region of concern, but it has already involved a major expansion of stand-by bases and other facilities, mostly notably in South West and Central Asia. Given the belief that a number of African countries also constitute possible bases for paramilitary groups, the latest aspect of this policy is to develop wider military links across the continent.

The United States already has a substantial base in Djibouti, providing a presence in the Horn of Africa, and is seeking closer links with Morocco and Tunisia and aircraft refueling agreements with Senegal and Uganda. Perhaps most significant is the *New York Times* report that the Pentagon would like training facilities in Algeria and Mali.

With these developments, a more truly global capability is now coming into place, but it remains the case that US military planners are anxious to avoid large numbers of troops having to be in place in any one area of instability. Ideally, their aim is to be able to pacify regional threats to their security quickly, followed by an early withdrawal, but in the first two examples, Afghanistan and Iraq, it is simply not working.

The problems facing the substantial US forces in Afghanistan remain formidable, and are complicated by a persistent US policy of using highly autocratic warlords to help maintain security, while failing to support Mr Karzai in his attempts to rein them in. Meanwhile, in Iraq, it is now becoming accepted that the level of violence and opposition is such that it may even be necessary to send additional troops.

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Such a measure would be in direct contradiction to Donald Rumsfeld's view that the US can manage with a smaller army, but it would amount to much more than this. In its way, what happens in Iraq over the next three months will do much to determine the prospects for the neo-conservative security agenda. If the current dissent, violence and opposition is brought under control, then a vigorous international security agenda will be maintained and enhanced, with a network of facilities stretching across the world.

If, on the other hand, a substantial and costly insurgency develops in Iraq, then this will have an effect on the whole security agenda, determining how the USA military posture develops for some years to come.