

**International Security Monthly Briefing – December 2006**

## **RESPONDING TO THE BAKER REPORT**

Paul Rogers

### **The Execution of Saddam Hussein**

December 2006 was one of the worst months for civilian casualties in Iraq, marking the end of a year in which sectarian violence had become far worse, even as the underlying insurgency against US forces and Iraq security forces had also accelerated. The very end of the year was marked by two events that symbolised the problems – the execution of Saddam Hussein and the death of the 3,000<sup>th</sup> US soldier.

Although the criminal investigations and trial of Saddam Hussein were theoretically under the control of the Iraqi government, the reality was that the United States overwhelmingly funded and advised on both operations. Only in the last few hours of his life was Saddam Hussein handed over to Iraqi forces for execution, with his body being returned immediately to US custody for transport to his home village near Tikrit. The execution itself was marred by a degree of disorganisation and abuse that further alienated Sunni communities but was also significant in that there was no expectation that it would have any effect in curbing the insurgency.

This was in marked contrast to the killing of his two sons in July 2003 and to his own detention that following December. Both were expected to do substantial damage to the insurgency but neither had any discernible effect. Partly because of this, and also because of the failure of other events such as the end of the Coalition Provisional Authority and various elections to curb the insurgency, there were no expectations that Hussein's execution would have any effect. It is now recognised that the insurgency has, in the past four years, evolved well beyond being a Ba'athist project.

For the United States and its coalition partners, the precise sequence of the trials and the rapid execution had a considerable political value. The charges against Saddam Hussein that were heard first related to the killing of over a hundred villagers in the early 1990s, following an assassination plot against him. It was for these charges that he was executed. Even though these were serious charges, there were much greater offences that were due to come before the court but which will now not be heard. These related to the conduct of the devastating *Anfal* campaign against Iraqi Kurds between 1987 and 1989.

During this campaign, many tens of thousands of Kurds were killed, frequently in mass executions, at least 2,000 villages were completely destroyed, and chemical weapons were used against unprotected civilian populations. The poison gas aspect of the *Anfal* campaign reached its peak with the attacks on Halabja and other Kurdish towns and villages, mainly in March 1988, and were responsible for several thousand deaths.

The problem for the United States, and indeed for France, Russia, Britain and other western countries, was that the *Anfal* campaign came at a time when the Saddam Hussein regime was effectively allied to western states, primarily because it was seen as a crucial buffer against revolutionary Iran, having been fighting a bitter war with Iran since 1980. France and the then Soviet Union were the main suppliers of arms to Iraq at this time, Britain was minimalist in its condemnation of the attack on Halabja and the United States was actually fighting alongside Iraq in its war with Iran.

The coincidence of timing was extraordinary in that ships of the US Navy attacked and destroyed a significant part of the Iranian Navy in a series of actions that took place within weeks of the Halabja massacre. While there were escalations by both Iran and the United States, the US Navy's action and

other intelligence aid to the Saddam Hussein regime undoubtedly curbed the advantage that Iran was gaining in the war, helping to pressure the Tehran regime into a ceasefire later in 1988.

If Saddam Hussein's dominant role in the *Anfal* campaign had been tried in open court, there is little doubt that much evidence would have been presented on the nature of the relationship of the regime to western states, especially the United States. That embarrassment was avoided by the sequencing of the trials and by the rapid implementation of the death penalty.

### **The Insurgency**

Suicide bombs, kidnappings, torture and numerous murders prevailed throughout much of Iraq, especially in the Greater Baghdad area, and December was also a month of singularly high US casualties. During the course of the month, 115 US military personnel were killed, the highest figure for over two years and the third highest figure for any month since the war began. Moreover, there were particularly high numbers of combat injuries, almost 650 in the four weeks to 27 December.

For 2006 as a whole, the US forces suffered 824 people killed and 5,676 injured. The figures are very close to those for the previous year, but the figures disguise the deterioration in security in Iraq since circumstances have changed in two significant respects. The first is that for much of 2006, US forces were conducting fewer ground patrols and resorting much more to the use of air power. As such, fewer of their troops were at risk from roadside bombs and sniper fire. Secondly, personal and vehicle protection of US forces has improved immensely, especially the almost universal use of personal body armour, heavily armoured versions of the Humvee multi-purpose jeep, and the introduction of the Stryker armoured personnel carrier. Given these two developments, the reality during 2006 was that the insurgency actually became more intense, with a marked increase in individual attacks on US personnel.

During the latter part of 2006 there was a strong tendency in Washington to portray the Iraq War as having made a transition from an insurgency against US and coalition occupying forces to an internal conflict with the foreign forces trying to keep the peace. This was a very long way from the real situation, but there is little doubt that this will be a theme that will be maintained in the coming months. At the same time, in the closing months of 2006 the Iraq War became an even bigger issue in US domestic politics, culminating in the reverses for the Republicans in the mid-session elections in early November.

### **After Baker**

Last month's briefing, *After the US Elections*, identified two significant features in the run up to the publication of the Baker report from the Iraq Study Group. One was the pre-publication attempt by neo-conservative elements to rubbish the work of the Group in advance of publication, and the other was the manner in which these elements held on to their determination to maintain the administration's forceful military stance in Iraq.

In the event, the Baker report got widespread publicity and there was an assumption that many of its main recommendations would be implemented. Instead, it became a nine-day wonder with virtually no concessions likely from the Bush administration. Of the many recommendations in the report, the two most significant were a slow but progressive withdrawal of US forces from Iraq accompanied by intensive efforts to improve and accelerate the training of Iraqi police and security forces, and engagement with both Iran and Syria. Neither of these was taken up by the administration.

In the month following the publication of the report it became clear that the Bush administration was not just ignoring the report but was actually developing policy in the opposite direction to the recommendations. This was related to abundant evidence that neo-conservative analysts and opinion formers had retained considerable influence in the White House and that their views were coming to

dominate the agenda. This might be surprising given the enthusiastic support from such quarters for the Iraq War, in spite of all the difficulties since encountered, but is probably a true indication of attitudes close to President Bush and, especially, around the office of Vice-President Cheney.

The most common view of neo-conservative analysts is that it is essential for the United States to increase its forces in Iraq by around 30,000 troops and to maintain that high level for at least 18 months, rather than have a brief surge of around six months. The time difference is crucial, as a six-month surge could be maintained by re-ordering deployments through keeping some forces in place beyond their normal tours of duty and bringing other forces in early, essentially achieving the surge through overlap. An eighteen-month surge would require more rapid rotation of troops and the more intensive use of reservists, both likely to lead to further problems of morale.

The neo-conservative view is, in one sense, an admission of failure for the war so far, in that what lies behind it is a recognition that US attempts to train Iraqi security forces have failed. It is worth remembering that this process, which has been under way for three years, was consistently seen as the main answer to Iraq's problems. While US forces would remain in the country indefinitely, they would be largely confined to a few major bases with their numbers greatly reduced but serving as a final guarantor of security for a pro-American government. Most issues of security would be handled by the revitalised Iraqi army and police forces. This is now acknowledged to have been a failed policy, the recent British dismantling of a corrupt special police unit in Basra being just one small example of a much wider issue.

Whatever the developments in US policy in Iraq, it is a domestic issue that will increasingly dominate policy in Iraq – the build-up to the 2008 Presidential elections. Until recently, the view remained within the Bush administration that Iraq was “winnable” within the time frame of President Bush's second term. That is now seen as a lost cause, and the policy over the next year or so is likely to be much more one of damage limitation. What is more likely is a sustained effort to damp down the extent of the violence without any real hope of developing a long-term solution. That will be a problem for Bush's successor, but if the Iraq situation can be managed, if need be by an increase in troop levels, then that might at least help ensure that a Republican representative makes it to the White House in 2008.

### **Warning Signs on Iran**

The second main issue in the Baker Report related to contact with Syria and Iran. Although there may be an increase in the low level informal contacts with the Tehran administration, and some attempt to engage with Syria, what is in prospect falls very far short of what was advocated by the Baker Report. Indeed, in the case of Iran, the indications are of a tougher policy. On US insistence, a potentially harsh UN Security Council resolution was passed, even though its full implementation would require the unlikely support of Russia and China. More significantly, the US Navy began to deploy a second carrier battle group to the Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea area. Meanwhile the Ahmadinejad government went ahead with its inflammatory “Holocaust Denial” conference and also used news of the US Navy's deployment to encourage domestic support at a time of student disturbances and a more general decline in popularity. Its response to the UN Security Council's resolution was to announce an increase in the pace of its uranium enrichment programme.

The possibility of US military action against Iran has declined in recent months, although an unexpected crisis is always possible. At the same time, the risk of Israeli action has increased. Within Israel, the government remains troubled after the failures in last summer's Lebanon War, and there is a possibility of further action in Lebanon this year, not least because of the crucial need to maintain Israel's posture of deterrence through overwhelming conventional defence capabilities. The issue of Iran, though, is even more deep-seated, and it may be that circumstances will dictate 2007 as being the most appropriate year for military action.

This is based on three calculations. The first, and most fundamental, is that Israel remains dedicated to the policy of not allowing Iran to develop nuclear weapons. Secondly, any action against Iran is best taken when a broadly sympathetic administration is in place in Washington. If the Bush administration is assessed as being in terminal decline in a few months time, and has moved into the status of a true lame duck presidency, then it makes sense to take action against Tehran in the next few months.

Finally, the Ahmadinejad government is something of a “gift” to the Israelis, making it potentially easier for them to argue the necessity of taking action. This is not just pure politics – the “Holocaust Denial” conference has struck a very raw nerve within Israel, and would make domestic support for military action very strong indeed. The fact that the Ahmadinejad government might not be averse to being subjected to Israel military action, on the grounds that it would be a powerful unifying force within Iran, makes the risk of a confrontation more likely still.

It is in this context that US military developments may be particularly significant. If, in the early months of 2007, the United States maintains two carrier battle groups in the region and also boosts its forces in Iraq, this gives it greater immediate military potential in the region at a time of a possible crisis with Iran. This does not mean that direct US involvement in Israeli action against Tehran is likely. What it does mean, though, is that the Pentagon would expect that any Iranian response to Israeli military action would be directed partly at US forces in the region. With increased capabilities, the United States would be in a better position to respond. All of this means that the attention inevitably being placed on Iraq may just be misplaced, with Iran being the more important focus in the coming months.

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Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available in English and Spanish from the ORG website at [www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk) and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.

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