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SPRING OFFENSIVES IN TWO WARS

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Iraq

At the beginning of June, an American air raid in central Iraq resulted in the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born paramilitary leader who had figured prominently in US accounts of the insurgency in Iraq. Zarqawi's death was covered across much of the world, but no more intensively than in the United States. This stemmed from two factors, the need in Washington to link the Iraq war to Bush's global war on terror and the specific US focus on Zarqawi.

The first of these is largely a consequence of the loss of support for the Iraq War that has developed over the past twelve months in the United States. A combination of rising US military casualties, the high costs of the war and the fact that there have been many false dawns in terms of an easing of the insurgency have all combined to make the war increasingly unpopular and even to contribute to the marked decline in support for President Bush himself. There has always been a tendency to regard the war as part of the wider campaign against al-Qaida and its associates, but this has been pressed consistently by the Bush administration in recent months.

It originated in the middle of 2003 when the insurgency began to develop as a serious impediment to US policy in Iraq. President Bush made the point in his "bring 'em on" comment, implying that Iraq would serve as a magnet for jihadists, enabling the US military to defeat them there instead of facing the prospect of further attacks on the scale of 9/11 in the continental United States. While Bush has more recently regretted that remark, given the intensity of the conflict in Iraq, his administration has done nothing to diminish the emphasis on the relationship of the Iraq War to the 'war on terror'. The implication is that the occupation of Iraq is a direct response to 9/11 and therefore demands patriotic support.

This is, incidentally, in marked contrast to the attitude of Prime Minister Blair in Britain, where there is a studious and persistent denial of any connection between the London paramilitary attacks of last July and British foreign policy, especially Britain's sustained involvement in Iraq alongside the United States. At the end of June the UK Home Office published an account of the events surrounding the July bombings that made almost no reference to Iraq, even in the section dealing with the motivation of the bombers. At the same time the Intelligence and Security Committee, a joint and semi-secret select committee of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, issued a more detailed report. While this did make a connection between motivation and Iraq/Afghanistan, it was a minor part of the committee's consideration.

The discontinuity between Washington and London on the Iraq/war on terror relationship has therefore persisted, and was made more obvious by the second factor mentioned above – the US emphasis on the significance of Zarqawi. This was building for the best part of a year before his death, and involved the persistent emphasis on his individual role, both as the key player in the Iraq insurgency and also because of his claimed close linkage with the wider al-Qaida movement. The emphasis on individuals in US representations of the war has been notable over the whole of the past five years, with Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar being the original objects of attention, followed by Saddam Hussein and his two sons in the immediate aftermath of the termination of the Iraqi regime.

Independent analysts have long questioned the significance of Zarqawi within Iraq, most seeing him more as a self-publicising radical with a particularly thuggish bent, even to the extent of suspected sharp differences in policy between him and the wider al-Qaida movement. For Washington, though, he was

the direct evidence of the al-Qaida/Iraq link, so his death meant a major achievement, likely to be almost as significant as the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003. As a consequence, there was an expectation that the insurgency in Iraq would at last stand a serious chance of being brought under control.

Among the neoconservative community in Washington the prospects for such progress required an immediate commitment by Washington – what might amount to a late Spring Offensive to consolidate the gains implicit in Zarqawi's death. There were immediate calls for an increase in troop levels, not least by the use of reserve units available in Kuwait, and for the ongoing counterinsurgency operation in the key city of Ramadi to be intensified.

Within days, the Iraqi government announced, in concert with the US authorities in Baghdad, the mounting of an intensive operation in greater Baghdad to clamp down severely on insurgent operations, hoping to use the presumed disruption to the insurgency caused by Zarqawi's death as a springboard for gaining control of the capital. The Zarqawi factor was regarded as particularly important, both by the Americans and by the newly constituted Iraqi administration, because the first five months of 2006 had been extraordinarily difficult. Civilian casualties in and around Baghdad alone were reported to be of the order of 6,000, running at almost double the rate of the similar period for 2005, and US casualties had risen again in March, April and May, following a very low death rate in February, the lowest since June 2003.

For a few days after Zarqawi's death, there was a modest lull, both in US casualties and in the much greater issue of Iraqi civilian deaths. This was similar to the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein's capture back in 2003, but, as in that case, it did not last and, during the course of June the violence rapidly intensified once more. At the end of the month, the Central Morgue in Baghdad reported receiving 1,595 bodies during the course of June, 16% more than in the month leading up to Zarqawi's death. US casualties also showed no decrease, with 62 killed and over 450 wounded, a level similar to that experienced throughout 2005 and much of 2006. One month after Zarqawi's death, the US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, had to acknowledge that "...in terms of the level of violence, it has not had any impact at this point."

One of the developing issues in the Iraq War is the rapidly increasing incidence of inter-community violence, with frequent Shi'a claims of Sunni-inspired killings, including many car bombs, but with Sunni leaders pointing to the existence of Shi'a death squads and militia groups, some of them operated by government ministries under Shi'a control. What is clear is that the evolving violence has at least four components.

One remains the anti-occupation insurgency, directed primarily at US forces and continuing at an intensity that is resulting in substantial US casualties even if the American forces are relying more on air power and less on ground patrols. In such circumstances, the tendency towards an increased use of the US firepower advantage inevitably results in higher civilian casualties, in turn leading to an intensified opposition to the occupation. Beyond the anti-occupation insurgency is the closely linked opposition to the Iraqi government, with this widely seen as a client administration of the American occupiers. Beyond that but overlapping is the rapid development of the inter-communal violence, much of this stemming from the positioning of confessional groups with an eye to the longer-term divisions of power.

Finally there is the existence of the foreign jihadist elements that move in and out of Iraq, may number less than a thousand within the country at any one time but, over months and years, constitute many thousands of recruits to the broad al-Qaida cause. Given that the al-Qaida movement and its associated are working on timetables for change that range over many decades, the core value to them of Iraq still lies in the steady accumulation of a cadre of young paramilitaries with experience of a largely urban insurgency against exceptionally well-armed US troops. In this context, the significance of the month of

June 2006 was that it was one more occasion in which US forces and their coalition partners could attempt to point to a new dawn in their counter-insurgency operations. In much less than a month it proved to be one more false dawn, yet there remained no sign of any change of US policy.

If there was one development of long-term significance it was the confluence of military and political trends in US attitudes. On the military side, the United States forces continued the move towards consolidation of forces into fewer and larger bases, with those mainly being developed away from the main towns and cities, with the hope of cutting casualties and thereby ensuring greater security for the US military. Politically, there was a developing tendency to concentrate on the significance of the Malaki government, with the implication that a civil war evolving out of the insurgency might best be seen, from a US point of view, as a matter of internal Iraqi politics, rather than a critical problem that might be blamed on US policy over the past three years.

This may become a major feature of Washington's political rhetoric in the coming months, especially in the run-up to themed-sessional elections to Congress in November, but it ignores the fundamental reality that a state that takes over and occupies the territory of another state, is responsible in international law for the security of the inhabitants of that state. The United States may gloss over this, and there may be a domestic imperative to do so, but its failure to secure post-regime security for ordinary Iraqis is a matter that cannot be ignored, whatever domestic circumstances dictate.

Afghanistan

Since the termination of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001, a number of analysts have pointed to two aspects of that violent event. One was that the Taliban militias, their al-Qaida associates and other allied groups were not so much defeated as melted away into cities, towns and villages in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The second was that some highly experienced UN officials and others pointed to the urgent need, early in 2002, to provide a major stabilisation force of 30,000 or more troops to avoid a security vacuum and enable Afghanistan to stand a real chance of post-war reconstruction and development after more than two decades of war.

Such a force was not provided. European coalition partners provided barely 5,000 troops, and the early re-development of insurgent activity in eastern Afghanistan meant that US troops remained in that part of the country in a more traditional counter-insurgency role. Any larger US role was overshadowed and then sidelined by the escalating emphasis on the requirement for regime change in Iraq throughout 2002. Although there was some progress in Kabul and some other northern towns and cities, large parts of the country received little help.

By early 2006 there were still barely 9,000 NATO troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with the British elements pitched almost immediately into counter-insurgency operations, a very different outcome from the "hearts and minds" operations they were meant to be involved in. Meanwhile, the non-ISAF counter-insurgency forces under US control had risen to some 26,000 troops, the great majority of them American, supported by a wide range of helicopters and strike aircraft, extending up to B-52 and B-1B strategic bombers. The intensity of the counter-insurgency war has been remarkable, with Taliban elements claiming to have 12,000 personnel active within Afghanistan and perhaps double that number secure across the border in the frontier districts of Pakistan. At least 1,100 people were killed in the violence during May and June, and an *Economist* report (8 July) cited one US helicopter gunship unit alone as firing 31,000 rounds of ammunition and 1,600 rockets in a recent three-month period.

The upsurge in violence across much of southern and eastern Afghanistan has been anticipated by some analysts for nearly two years, and there were indications of a Taliban resurgence twelve months ago. What has emerged in the late spring of 2006 was therefore predicted at an earlier stage, and three

factors suggest that there were good reasons for the apparent delay in the resurgence. One was the subtle change in the Afghan drugs trade, with record harvests predicted for the 2005/06 crop and a marked tendency for raw opium to be refined into heroin and morphine within Afghanistan (see April briefing, *From Cold War to Long War*). This has provided the Taliban, associated groups and allied warlords with major additional sources of revenue to fund their activities and underpin a longer-term strategy.

The second factor has been the persistent lack of control over the frontier districts of Pakistan by the Pakistani authorities, allowing those extensive districts, especially North and South Waziristan, to become secure areas for the Afghan anti-occupation insurgents. The final factor is the very strong suspicion that the reason why there was not the predicted Taliban insurgency in 2005 was that the leadership had taken the strategic decision to bide its time and develop its capabilities, both through recruitment, establishment of the appropriate logistics network and, most important, through the progressive takeover of the more remote rural districts of Afghanistan away from Kabul and the northern cities. If this is the case, then the development of the Spring Offensive of 2006 is actually evidence of an insurgency that is far more robust than expected.

It would also be wise to assume that the leadership of the insurgents are working according to a three-part programme. One is to progressively re-take control over much of rural Afghanistan, utilising new drug trade money as a useful additional sources of financial support. A second is to instil in existing supporters and new recruits an acceptance that casualties will be heavy, and a third is that the aim is actually to regain control of the country as a whole. Since that is entirely unacceptable to the current and probable future administrations in Washington, this implies that Afghanistan will remain a country of conflict involving foreign occupying forces for at least a decade.

Conclusion

The late spring of 2006 has seen two offensives. In Iraq, US and Iraqi government forces have attempted to capitalise on the death of Zarqawi with a major operation to bring the 39-month insurgency under some degree of control. The evidence strongly suggests that this has failed. In Afghanistan, a revitalised Taliban and its numerous associates have bided their time and have now taken control of significant rural areas in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan. By the end of June they were succeeding in their efforts. One spring offensive by coalition forces in Iraq is failing, the other, by their opponents in Afghanistan, is making progress. Both represent major problems for the United States and its coalition partners.

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