

International Security Monthly Briefing

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**'Iraq and Insecurity'**

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*Professor Paul Rogers*

During the course of August and the early weeks of September, the security situation for the United States in Iraq deteriorated markedly. The massive car bomb in the holy city of Najaf followed the bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad and the assassination of the Head of the UN mission, the widely-respected Brazilian diplomat, Sergio Vieira de Mello. There were frequent attacks on US troops each day, with scores of deaths and injuries being inflicted. Although the US forces remained welcome in the Kurdish region of NE Iraq, continuing problems of public services, rampant unemployment, high levels of criminal activity and a stagnant economy all combined to reduce the acceptance of the US as an occupying power and to increase support for opposition.

**The US Predicament**

For the United States there are now four problems facing it that together amount to a serious security predicament. The first is that the increasing instability in Iraq is happening in parallel with a resurgence of Taliban activity in Afghanistan. This is tying down close to 10,000 US troops in a small-scale but dangerous guerrilla war that is adding to severe problems of post-conflict violence in many parts of the country. Some key intelligence officials and special forces troops have, moreover, had to be withdrawn from Afghanistan because of the worsening situation in Iraq.

The second issue is that the cost of occupying Iraq and supporting reconstruction is proving to be very much higher than anticipated, given that the United States had expected to have been able to reduce its forces in Iraq to around 70,000 troops, instead of nearly double that number that actually remain in the country. President Bush's estimate of a budget need for some \$87 billion in Iraq, most of it for the military, has been a singularly unwelcome surprise for Congress. It is a situation exacerbated by the very high costs of maintaining combat troops in what is essentially an environment of urban guerrilla warfare.

The continual wear and tear on equipment ranging from tracked vehicles through to helicopters, frequently operating in adverse environments, has wildly exceeded expectations, and comes at a time when many hundreds of injured or sick troops are being airlifted back to the United States each month for treatment.

The third issue is that although almost all of the opposition to US occupation is coming from elements within Iraq, not least supporters of the Ba'ath Party, evidence is now emerging that radical Islamists are now beginning to move into Iraq, seeing it as a new battleground in the ongoing conflict with the United States. To al-Qaida and its associates, the presence of well over 100,000 US troops in Iraq is proof to its followers that the United States is intent on occupying a key part of the Arab world. Moreover, this is happening when the Middle East road map is virtually defunct and Israeli political leaders can talk openly of assassinating the elected leader of the Palestinians, Yasser Arafat, with little reaction from Washington.

The final issue is that the situation in Iraq is now beginning to feature as a potential election issue in the United States. The 2004 Presidential election may still be 14 months away, and the Democrats have certainly not yet focused on a political figure to challenge George W. Bush, but potential candidates and other experienced Democrat politicians are certainly focusing on the problems in Iraq, with much of this concentrated on the escalating costs that are coming at a time of a burgeoning federal deficit.

### **Sharing the Burden**

It is for all of these reasons that the Bush administration is looking urgently for ways of sharing the Iraqi burden, even to the extent of going back to the UN Security Council, having treated it with near-disdain only a few months ago. Significantly, much of the pressure to get a UN resolution that might encourage other countries to commit troops is actually coming from the upper echelons of the US military, where there is a far greater awareness of the security situation in Iraq compared with that recognised by the civilian administration in the Pentagon.

In trying to extricate itself from the excessive commitments in Iraq, the Bush administration faces two substantial problems. The first is that it is now very unlikely to get help from countries such as France or even India unless it relinquishes considerable political power to the United Nations in overseeing the rapid transition to an independent Iraq. But the Bush administration is simply not willing to do this, not least because it is an essential underpinning of US policy in the Middle East that oil-rich Iraq should develop as a client regime of Washington. This is precisely what the French, among others, are determined to avoid, with the UK still trying to reconcile two near-opposite positions.

The second problem is developing back in Washington itself, where the neo-conservative view is that the Bush administration should not even be considering any greater involvement for the United Nations. Instead, according to this view, the US simply has to commit substantially more troops, civil personnel and financial resources to ensuring that Iraq remains firmly under US control.

Moreover, this much-increased commitment has to come now rather than in several months, the view being that the United States just has to demonstrate full control in Iraq before the end of the year. What would be disastrous, according to the neo-conservative

view, is an ongoing guerrilla war in Iraq stretching into the New Year and having a full impact on the Presidential campaign.

To most outside observers, the United States is in considerable difficulties in Iraq and this is recognised in the State Department and in those other parts of the administration, as well as the senior military, all of whom recognise the need to accept international help in return for giving up control over Iraq's political future. The difficulties are recognised by the neo-conservatives but the response is quite different, with an absolute need to retain control without sharing power with other states, and certainly not the French. This lies at the heart of differences now emerging in Washington, not least because for the United States to accept a multilateral solution undercuts the very idea of creating a New American Century, an outlook that is at the core of the neo-conservative vision.