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‘US Options in Iraq’

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The visit of Paul Wolfowitz to Iraq in late October was intended to provide an opportunity for positive news, not least in relation to the Madrid conference of potential donors and the ending of the curfew in Baghdad at the start of Ramadan. In the event, an upsurge in attacks on US ground patrols, the destruction of a Black Hawk helicopter near Tikrit, the rocket attack on the Baghdad Hotel and the bombings of the Red Cross headquarters and police stations all demonstrated the opposite – that the war in Iraq is escalating.

It is still common practice to view the conflict as a three-week war last March and April followed by an aftermath involving a somewhat tortuous road to post-war peace. That is no longer appropriate – a more accurate assessment is that the war started in March and is now seven months old. From such a standpoint it started with a vigorous and, in human terms, immensely costly phase, followed by a period of relative calm that lasted for about two months. Since late May, a guerrilla war has developed that has grown in intensity as the elements opposing occupation have organised themselves in a systematic manner, and, more recently, have been joined by paramilitaries coming in from abroad.

Four features of this ongoing war are immediately relevant. One is that civilian and military casualties in the initial three-week phase were very high, with at least 8,000 civilians killed and over 20,000 injured and, while it is more difficult to analyse the evidence, possibly more military casualties. The second factor is that, in spite of this, key elements of the regime's elite forces such as the Special Republican Guard and the militias attached to the old security and intelligence agencies, hardly took part in the war, having melted away as the Saddam Hussein regime was deposed.

Thirdly, the old regime had huge quantities of munitions stored at numerous dumps across the country, and many of these munitions are still available to support the developing guerrilla war. Finally, that war does not yet have general support, not even in the Sunni regions of Iraq, but such support is growing as the pace of reconstruction remains so slow, as civilian casualties rise, and as the US presence becomes more clearly seen as a foreign occupation.

For all of these reasons, a sound analysis must conclude that a long-term insurgency is in prospect and that we may still be in the early stages of a protracted war.

In such circumstances, the recent upsurge in violence has been met with strong statements of commitment by the Head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer, by Donald Rumsfeld and by President Bush himself. Even so, this disguises a situation in which the United States has to respond, and it is instructive to examine the nature of the possible responses.

One choice would be to substantially increase the number of US troops on the ground. Some increases are planned, with the call-up of an additional 15,000 reservists, but the United States does not have unlimited numbers of troops to make up the additional 100,000 or more that would be required in order to have a significant effect. After the Cold War, the US Army shed much of its personnel, not least because political and military leaders believed that future wars would be fought largely with precision-guided missiles and bombs.

Moreover, the United States has had to maintain over 10,000 combat troops in Afghanistan, has been establishing new military bases across Central Asia, and keeps substantial forces in East Asia and the Pacific in addition to European commitments. As a result, it does not have the capacity to maintain a large troop presence in Iraq for any length of time – indeed even the current deployments are leading to serious problems of morale.

A second response would be to persuade other states to contribute large numbers of peace-enforcing troops, but there seems little prospect of this. Among the few states that would be capable of committing substantial forces, the Russians are hardly acceptable to Washington, the French are currently unwilling, the Germans are preoccupied with Afghanistan and the Turks are unacceptable to the Iraqis. Arab states will not offer troops, the Indians refused three months ago largely because of domestic opposition, and Pakistan has recently expressed a notable reluctance to help.

These and other states are not prepared to commit their troops to what is seen as a potential war zone, and they are supported in this view as we witness attacks within Iraq on forces from Britain, Ukraine and Denmark.

A third option would be to accept the need for US withdrawal and hand over the transition of Iraq to democracy and independence to the United Nations. Whether the UN would take on such a task in the present circumstances is questionable, especially as it would be inheriting a deeply unstable security environment.

Even if it was willing, though, it is not credible that such a move would be acceptable in Washington. Allowing Iraq to develop as a fully independent state could well lead to it requiring an end to US influence and involvement in the country. This would be entirely unacceptable to the United States given that the establishment of a client regime controlling Iraq's very large oil resources has been an underlying motive for destroying the Saddam Hussein regime from the start.

The final option, and the one that is currently being followed, is to try and build up security forces from within Iraq. This has now got a very high priority, not least as the US authorities try to recover from the extraordinary mistake of disbanding the Iraqi army shortly after the end of the initial conflict. The process involves developing a functioning police force numbering 50,000 together with over 30,000 people in facility protection, civil defence and border patrols.

The hope and intention is that this will hugely supplement the efforts and capabilities of the US forces, but the problem facing the United States is that this is being undertaken when the level of guerrilla warfare is expanding, and the Iraqi police force is being singled out for systematic attacks. Moreover, if this strategy does not work, then the United States has little else it can do except consider the option of withdrawal. Apart from the risk of even greater insecurity in Iraq, that would represent as great a reversal of US security policy as the losing of the Vietnam War. Such an outcome is not something that can be remotely contemplated in Washington, especially with a Presidential Election approaching.

In these circumstances, if the level of violence and insecurity in Iraq does persist (and even increase still further), we should expect to see an even greater determination by the Bush administration to maintain control. This will involve further attempts to increase the effectiveness of Iraqi security forces, coupled with whatever further troop deployments that can be managed. If the effect of this is to further encourage resistance to occupation then Iraq will have entered a dangerous spiral of violence that will be very difficult to counter.