

International Security Monthly Briefing

May 2003

After the War

Professor Paul Rogers

The stated reason for the war against Iraq was the refusal of the Saddam Hussein regime to comply with UN resolutions relating to the disarmament of its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programmes and its production of ballistic missiles. A number of analysts argued that an unstated reason was the requirement to terminate the regime as it represented a potential threat to US and western interests, not least because it was an oppositional regime in a region containing the world's largest concentration of oil reserves.

In the immediate run-up to the war, it was made clear that the regime might have weapons of mass destruction ready to use, and that it was therefore an immediate threat to the international community. This was not a view held across much of the world, including a number of leading European states, but the war went ahead and the regime was terminated relatively quickly.

Within two weeks of the war ending, it became clear that the regime did not have weapons of mass destruction ready for use, and there were even questions as to the existence of such systems. Moreover, since the United States is not willing to allow the UN inspectors to continue their work, any findings by US analysts will not be readily accepted as genuine in the immediate region.

In any case, the whole question of weapons of mass destruction has been overshadowed by two other issues – the rising mood of post-war anti-Americanism in Iraq, and the extent to which the United States plans a long-term military presence in the country.

Why the Opposition?

There appears to have been an expectation that there would be a widespread and deeply felt welcome for coalition troops as liberators of the Iraqi people from the tyranny of the Saddam Hussein regime. In some parts of the country, especially the Kurdish areas, there was a positive response, but it was restricted in extent and much of it was short-lived. There was some expectation that members of the Sunni Islamic community would not be too vocal in their support for the US forces, as the regime had drawn much of its support from this community. What was very much more surprising was the conspicuous lack of support from the majority Shi'ite community that had suffered so much at the hands of the regime.

Within days of the ending of the regime, there were anti-American demonstrations being called with these gaining substantial support. More generally, a lack of central political control meant that religious communities frequently filled the vacuum of political organisation.

OXFORD • RESEARCH • GROUP

As far as can be judged, there are several reasons that together explain the opposition to what is already seen as a US occupation, and they need to be appreciated in order to assess whether it is going to be possible for the United States to maintain its security interests in post-war Iraq.

One factor that appears missing from most analysis of the post-war situation is the effect of the considerable loss of life among civilians and the Iraqi military. It is likely that the final civilian death toll will be close to 3,000, with up to three times that number injured, many of them seriously.

The military casualties are likely to have been very much higher. Coalition sources have been deeply reluctant to put a figure on the Iraqi military losses, but what they said on a few occasions during the war indicated a loss of up to 5,000 Iraqi soldiers in Basra, Nasiriyah, Najaf, Baghdad and elsewhere, in addition to the "destruction" of three Republican Guard divisions south of Baghdad by severe and persistent bombardment from US air and ground forces.

Even if the loss of life in these divisions was only one in five of those involved, this brings the Iraqi military death toll to over 10,000, with perhaps three times that number injured. These are all conservative estimates but a total figure of close to 50,000 Iraqis killed and injured in just three weeks of war is probable.

The war may thus have been brief but the effects among communities throughout much of Iraq would be substantial and long lasting, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis having lost relatives or friends. Whatever the antipathy towards the old regime, the human impact of the American actions will have been considerable.

An added problem is the existence of huge quantities of unexploded ordnance, especially from cluster bombs, throughout the country. In the two weeks since the war, in the Kurdish self-rule area alone, more than 80 civilians have been killed and 500 injured as a result of the effects of these weapons exploding.

Furthermore, the sustained looting, disruption of power and water supplies and chaotic conditions in the hospitals added to a sense of disorder that was inflamed by the knowledge that the occupying troops were highly selective in their approach to public order. The interior and oil ministries were secured at the earliest opportunity whereas hospitals were left unguarded to be looted.

A further problem, especially in the first two weeks, was the attitude of US troops. These were combat troops attempting to impose order when they had just fought an intense if brief war, they were facing the risk of suicide bombings, had no training in post-conflict peacekeeping and few had any knowledge of Arabic. In such circumstances they acted very clearly as occupiers, not peacekeepers.

Perhaps the core issue is that so many Iraqis do not see the US intervention as liberation, but rather as the replacement of one hated regime by a foreign occupying power that is in the business of reshaping the country in its own image by setting up a client regime and is intent on ensuring the long-term control of Iraq's immense oil reserves.

In this mind-set, the Saddam Hussein regime ended up using oil revenues for its own narrow purposes, doing so in a brutal and highly repressive manner. Nothing like that form of rigorous control is expected from the Americans, but control of Iraq's oil

wealth *is* anticipated. The US decision to bring in a senior western oil executive to run an integrated Iraqi oil industry is seen as a clear indication of a potentially long-term foreign control of the industry. Moreover, however brutal the Saddam Hussein regime, it was not a foreign power – the very fact that the United States is the world's only superpower and is seen to be occupying the country could be a powerful aid to the development of opposition based on political and religious nationalisms.

American Aims

Such an outlook may seem unfair to the United States, but the problem is that there are too many examples of early post-war decisions and actions that seem to support it. Thus it is already clear that the United Nations is being substantially side-lined in any post-conflict reconstruction and aid for the development of political institutions. US companies are dominating reconstruction and the United States itself is overseeing political developments. The issue of reconstruction is actually very significant because it can be viewed, from an Iraqi perspective, as the United States using Iraqi oil wealth to fund its own companies to repair damage done by its own troops.

In addition to controlling Iraq's oil industry a further indication of US intentions is the decision to bring in Dan Amstutz, a former senior executive of Cargill, the world's biggest grain exporter, to oversee Iraqi agricultural reconstruction. This does suggest the vigorously free-market approach likely to be adopted. According to Kevin Watkins, Policy Director of Oxfam, "Putting Dan Amstutz in charge of agricultural reconstruction in Iraq is like putting Saddam Hussein in charge of a human rights commission." It is a highly indicative decision given that there are plenty of highly experienced agricultural development specialists available from within the UN system.

In terms of military developments, there are clear indications that while the United States may move out many of its troops from the towns and cities as soon as it can, plans are being drawn up for a long-term military presence. These would include bases, or basing facilities, at Bashur in the North, the H1 air base in the west, Tallil near Nasiriyah in the south and a base near Baghdad. Moreover, these bases will be forming part of a US military presence stretching eastwards through the Caucasus almost to the Chinese border.

Overall, it is reasonable to say that the United States is in control of organised national political developments, is placing people in control of the two key aspects of the Iraqi economy, oil and agriculture, and is planning a long-term military presence. Whatever the approval of US forces for overthrowing Saddam Hussein, in Iraqi perceptions this very much has the look of replacing one regime with another. Moreover, the new regime, however it is formed, will be essentially seen as under the control of Washington which thereby gets to dominate the world's second largest reserves of oil, thereby increasing its "own" oil reserves by a factor of five.

Much of the early reaction to what is seen as a US occupation is coming from the majority Shi'ite community, especially in the south, with the early political organization being partially centred on the mosques. In reaction to this, Donald Rumsfeld has warned Iran against interfering in what he considers to be Iraqi internal affairs, but it would be dangerous to make Iran a scapegoat for internal opposition to US occupation.

Given that the United States has declared Iran to be part of the axis of evil, and given that another part, Iraq, has just been defeated and occupied, it would be surprising if Iran is not hugely concerned at the US presence across its western border. It should not therefore be surprising if Iranian elements seek common cause with Iraqi Shi'ites. The problem is that if Rumsfeld and others single out Iran as the very cause of the opposition to US occupying forces within Iraq, this may greatly underestimate the extent of that opposition, while making the Iranians even more concerned about their own security.

Perhaps what is most surprising about the immediate post-war period has been the extent of the immediate opposition to US forces within Iraq. There seems to have been little expectation of this either in Washington or London, but it is likely to create substantial obstacles to any attempt to ensure that an "acceptable" regime gains power in Baghdad. Given this early opposition, **any** regime in Baghdad that is not broadly acceptable across Iraq is likely to have to maintain power forcefully, with that position being backed up by the availability of US military power. This is not a recipe for a stable and peaceful post-war Iraq.