

Iraq's insurgency calculations

By Paul Rogers,
Created 2005-10-05 23:00

On 29 September the United States military commander in Iraq, General George W Casey Jr., gave a relatively straight account [1] to a Congressional hearing of the predicament of his forces there. In marked contrast to President Bush's upbeat assessment of recent developments, he acknowledged the many problems they face, including hundreds of attacks by insurgents each week.

The general [2] was even more candid in assessing the role of the Iraqi security forces in progressively replacing US forces. For example, only one battalion of Iraqi army troops is sufficiently well trained and organised to be able to operate without US support, compared with three battalions a few months ago – out of 120 battalions in the Iraqi police and security forces as a whole.

The problem is not just training. There is a deep reluctance on the part of the Americans to equip Iraqi forces with more advanced equipment or even with heavy weapons, since the policy would carry the risk of these weapons being turned by “unreliable” Iraqis against US troops themselves [2].

The American casualty figures in September at least provide some respite: forty-nine were killed, the lowest monthly figure since March. But there were 490 injuries, 174 of them serious, and the overall death toll [3] of 1,936 is rising steadily towards the symbolically significant 2,000 mark. This figure may well be reached during November, just one year ahead of the 2006 mid-term elections to Congress; this provides yet another reason why it is so important for the Bush administration to present an upbeat portrait of Iraqi developments, whatever the realities on the ground.

If you find Paul Rogers's weekly column [3] on global security valuable, please consider supporting openDemocracy by sending us a donation [3] so that we can continue our work and keep it free for all

The view from the administration is therefore as follows: there may well be short-term problems around the time of the constitutional referendum scheduled for 15 October [4] and the subsequent elections in December (if the latter go ahead), but it should be possible to start withdrawing troops early in 2006. Whether this prognosis is remotely likely depends on what happens with the insurgency, so it is particularly relevant to try and understand the aims of the insurgents themselves – not an easy matter given the current complexity of the developing conflict.

Who are these guys?

In successive phases over the past two-and-a-half years, the US authorities have described the insurgency in at least five different ways. First, for a few months after the termination of the

Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003, they were "dead-enders", harking back to the old regime and trying to resurrect a neo-Ba'athist rule. Second, from the latter part of 2003, they were derided as "remnants"; a designation that proved impossible to sustain as the insurgency persisted, especially after the first assault on Fallujah in April 2004 [4].

A third characterisation then arose, alleging the widespread use of "hired guns", young men paid to carry out attacks. A fourth quickly followed, involving some grudging acknowledgement that a degree of Iraqi nationalism [5] might be asserting itself. The significance of this, if true, was that people who were not necessarily Ba'athists were so incensed at a foreign occupation that was not able even to oversee proper reconstruction that they were moved to increasingly violent opposition.

By mid-2004, a fifth explanation came to the fore – that the insurgency was becoming dominated by foreign *ihadists* flocking to the country, especially from the rogue states of Syria and Iran. This served a useful purpose for the Bush administration: it meant that Iraq could be identified as a central battleground in the global war on terror, linking it directly to the 9/11 attacks.

This was hardly what Britain's government led by Tony Blair wanted to hear, because it implied that the Iraq policy was, after all, directly linked to al-Qaida. After the July 2005 bombings in London [6], the denial of such a link [6] became even more politically unacceptable and yet more rhetorically desperate (as at the annual Labour Party conference on 25-29 September [7], when no debate on Iraq was permitted).

The Bush administration has focused even more on the al-Qaida connection in the past two months, and repeatedly described Abu Musab al-Zarqawi [8] as "al-Qaida's man in Iraq". This concentration on a single figure is common in US political language, though it can also be transient (who now remembers Mullah Omar [9] in Afghanistan, "public enemy number 2" in 2001?); in any case, the important question is how realistic it is.

The best available evidence suggests that there are about 30,000 people actively involved in the insurgency against US occupying forces and the Iraqi government. The nationality of the many thousands of people detained as insurgent suspects over the past two years suggests that 5-10% are non-Iraqis (thus giving 1,500-3,000 expatriate insurgents), and that Syrians and particularly Iranians are markedly less evident than Algerians, Saudis and even Yemenis.

It is probable that the organising ability [10] of figures like al-Zarqawi is a factor in the campaign, that there may be a wider process of neo-Ba'athist Iraqis embracing a wider *ihadist* cause, and that dedicated potential suicide-bombers are indeed being drawn in to Iraq from other countries. But it remains most likely that the insurgency is, for the most part, a primarily Iraqi phenomenon.

What is not clear is the extent to which that may be changing. Over a period that must be measured in years rather than months, it is probable that Iraq will increasingly be seen as the core area for opposing neo-Christian, pro-elite occupying forces across the Arab world. If that transformation does indeed take place, what will it mean for the aims of the insurgency?

Better with than without you

The insurgency's current, domestic Iraq objectives are to evict coalition military forces, principally those of the United States; defeat the perceived imposition of Washington's client regime in Baghdad; and establish a leadership of Iraq that reasserts control of the country along broadly Ba'athist lines. Even insurgents who oppose Ba'athism share the commitment to an Iraq that is strong, independent and anti-American.

Within these objectives, though, subtle assessments are being drawn of what kind of American withdrawal would most favour the insurgents. In an elegant analysis, Ehsan Ahrari points to two possibilities: an orderly evacuation and handover to Iraqi security forces, with the insurgency diminished if not defeated; or a messy process in which US forces flee in disarray, perhaps not with the last helicopters flying from the embassy roof (as in Saigon in 1975), but certainly amid a worldwide perception of defeat and failure (see "The Indefatigable Insurgency", *Asia Times*, 4 October 2005 [11]).

Ehsan Ahrari argues that the second outcome is the one most desired by the *jihadi* elements in the insurgency – those with broad international connections who tend to see Iraq as a focus of a wider global confrontation. An abject humiliation for the US in Iraq would, in their view, seriously damage the entire American project in the middle east. The regional implications would be huge: the US might keep its bases in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman (and its new air control centre [11] in Qatar), but its military foothold in Saudi Arabia would diminish, it would face a confident Iran, and its Iraq project would have turned to ashes.

In addition to his weekly openDemocracy column, Paul Rogers writes an international security monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group; for details, click here [12]

The problem for insurgents [13] and Americans is that neither scenario – US military victory or its abject retreat – is likely. All indications suggest that the insurgency cannot be controlled, yet Iraq is simply too important for the United States to withdraw, however deep its predicament. The oil factor, both within Iraq and especially in the wider Persian Gulf region, is simply too central to US security interests, as Godfrey Hodgson explains in a powerful **openDemocracy** article (see "Oil and American politics [13]", 3 October 2005)

Does that mean that radical *jihadists* will be denied their aim of a chaotic American withdrawal? At least for the time being, probably yes; yet in one sense, they may be delivered an even better outcome [13]. From a global perspective, the one thing better for the al-Qaida network than a near-term US defeat is an American occupation force remaining in Iraq for a decade or more: this would provide to the *jihadists* a compelling propaganda argument in recruiting new supporters and in addition offer an incalculable military prize – a combat training-zone for a new generation of paramilitaries.

In this light, the speech of the US vice-president Dick Cheney on 3 October [14], saying that the struggle against terrorism in Iraq must continue and warning that a weakening would allow the country to become a "staging area" for America's enemies, is a gift to the *jihadists* in Iraq.

A forced US withdrawal in the next twelve to eighteen months would be welcome to the insurgents, but an asset of much greater value would be the long-term use of American firepower (as this week in western Iraq [15]) by US forces, with all the casualties [16], bitterness and resistance this entails – in turn exposing these forces to an increasingly sophisticated insurgency.

For those dedicated radicals who expect it to take several decades to establish their caliphate, the prospect of a few more years of opportunity to train and harden thousands of young *jihadists* is almost too good to be true. On current trends, it is also exactly what they are likely to get.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict/iraq_future_2901.jsp

Links:

[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/29/AR2005092902085.html>

target=_blank

[2] <http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2005/10/03/>

[two_generals_portray_progress_in_brighter_terms/ target=_blank](#)

[3] [http://www.icasualties.org/ target=_blank](http://www.icasualties.org/)

[4] <http://today.reuters.com/News/CrisesArticle.aspx?storyId=BAK162816> target=_blank

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,920569,00.html> target=_blank

[6] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk/2005/london_explosions/default.stm target=_blank

[7] <http://www.labour.org.uk/brighton2005> target=_blank

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Musab_al-Zarqawi target=_blank

[9] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1010/p1s4-wosc.html> target=_blank

[10] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A52564-2004Sep26.html> target=_blank

[11] http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GJ04Ak01.html target=_blank

[12] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm> target=_blank

[13] http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_insurgency.htm target=_blank

[14] <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N03594592.htm> target=_blank

[15] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iraq5oct05,0,2952889.story?coll=la-home-world> target=_blank

[16] [http://www.iraqbodycount.net/ target=_blank](http://www.iraqbodycount.net/)



This article is published by Paul Rogers, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.