

The war over there

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The frenzy of the presidential election season in the United States means that the wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq are getting little coverage in the local media. But much is happening on the ground in these countries - and elsewhere - that will help shape the agenda of the new incumbent in the White House in January 2009.

Afghanistan failures

The Taliban regime in Kabul was overthrown in November 2001. More than six years on, the government of Hamid Karzai controls barely 30% of the country (according to the United States director of national intelligence, Michael McConnell). Most of the country is in the hands of warlords and other local leaders, with a tenth under the sway of the Taliban. In 2007, political violence killed more than 6,500 people in Afghanistan, the highest annual total since the invasion of October 2001 (see Pamela Hess, "[Karzai Controls a Third of Afghanistan \[1\]](#)", AP, 27 February 2008). The number includes 480 civilians killed by militants and 360 killed by US or Nato forces (many of the latter in air strikes).

Both the frequency and the sophistication of insurgent bomb attacks have also increased. There is a notable tendency to use modern high explosives such as C4, in a method of operation learned by militants in Iraq and then brought to Afghanistan (see Jason Straziuso, "[Afghan Insurgents Step Up Attacks With More Lethal Bombs \[2\]](#)", *Boston Globe*, 22 February 2008). This trend confirms the fear of many analysts in the past five years that Iraq has become a *jihadi* combat-training zone, producing a new generation of younger paramilitaries who have gained experience against well-equipped US troops in an urban environment. The al-Qaida movement gains far more benefit from this experience than did its Islamist predecessors from the *mujahideen* who fought against poorly motivated Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Paul Rogers is professor of peace studies at Bradford University, northern England. He has been writing a weekly [column](#) [1] on global security on **openDemocracy** since 26 September 2001

Taliban militias have also been aided by a boom in opium-poppy cultivation (the area under cultivation rose by 17% in 2007). Afghanistan now supplies 93% of the world total, the bulk of it grown in Helmand and other southern provinces that are most under the influence of the Taliban (see Anne Gearan, "[US Clout in Afghanistan Slips \[3\]](#)", AP, 2 March 2008). The output of opium, heroin and morphine is fuelling drug-related offences in Afghanistan's neighbours: Iran alone has 1.3 million opiate users (compared with 3.8 million for the whole of Europe); drug abuse in Iraq has risen markedly; there are spillover effects in Pakistan and substantial increases in drugs seizures in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other central-Asian states (see Stephen Fidler, "[UN Alarm at Spread of Afghan Opium \[4\]](#)", *Financial Times*, 5 March 2008).

Pakistan worries

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan is leading United States military planners to focus more on western Pakistan, parts of which have become virtually free zones for Taliban and other militias. The Pentagon is anxious to step up training for the Pakistani army, a plan rendered problematic by the unsettled political situation in the country in the context of the [election](#) [4] of 18 February 2008. Even more controversial within Pakistan, however, is the ability of US government agencies to [operate](#) [5] their own combat-units there. A striking extension of this military freedom is the deployment of armed Predator drones, which have been used on at least two occasions to target presumed al-Qaida or Taliban leaders (see "[The Pakistan-Afghanistan abyss](#) [5]", 4 January 2008).

As Washington attempts to expand its capabilities within Pakistan, it is again worried about the willingness of the Pakistani authorities to revive peace agreements in the frontier districts (see Isambard Wilkinson, "US Concern Over Pakistan Deal With Militants [8]", *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March 2008). The latest in a number of such deals has been concluded in one of the Taliban's heartlands, North Waziristan. The danger for the US is that militants might use the security afforded by these agreements to launch attacks along the crucial supply-routes linking the port of Karachi to its forces (and those of its Nato allies) in Afghanistan (see "[A Pakistani dilemma](#) [8]", 15 November 2007)

These concerns are reinforced by the [persistent](#) [9] violence elsewhere in western Pakistan in the wake of the election. To take but four examples: on 25 February, the army's surgeon-general was killed in a suicide-bomb attack in the heavily protected [garrison city](#) [10] of Rawalpindi; on 1 March, thirty-eight people were killed in Mingora, Swat valley, at a [funeral](#) [11] for a policeman killed in an operation the day before; on 2 March, at least thirty-nine people were killed in an attack on a traditional tribal [meeting](#) [12] in the Darra Adam Kheil region; and on 4 March, four people died in an [attack](#) [13] by two suicide-bombers on a naval college in Lahore.

It is worth mentioning here that the US determination to use air power, drones and cruise missiles in its campaign against Islamist militants has extended once again to Somalia, whose conflict is [continuing](#) [14] beyond the gaze of most of the world's media. There, a sea-launched Tomahawk cruise missile was targeted on a suspected militant group in a remote village in the south of the country. US officials claimed an al-Qaida link, but local sources spoke of civilians being among the six killed and ten wounded (see Edmund Sanders, "[U.S. Missile Strike in Somalia Kills 6](#) [15]", *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2008).

Iraqi trends

In Iraq, a measure of current trends suggests that the impact of the United States military "surge" initiated in February 2007 is starting to diminish. The number of American [military casualties](#) [16] in December 2007 was very low, but the death-rate increased sharply in January and February 2008. The rise in Iraqi civilian casualties was even steeper; Iraqi ministry of health figures report a 36% rise in civilian deaths between the first two months of the year, a finding echoed in figures from the independent [Iraq Body Count](#) [17] (see Paul Tait, "[Iraq Casualties Rise Again After Qaeda Bombs](#) [18]", Reuters, 1 March 2008).

Two further important if little-reported [developments](#) [19] in Iraq are worthy of note: the increasingly unsustainable detention system wherein the US is incarcerating tens of thousands

In addition to his weekly **openDemocracy** column, Paul Rogers writes an international security monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group; for details, click [here](#) [6]

Paul Rogers's most recent book is [Why We're Losing the War on Terror](#) [7] (Polity, 2007) - an analysis of the strategic misjudgments of the post-9/11 and why a new security paradigm is needed

of alleged insurgents; and the growing frustration of some of the *Sunni* militias sponsored by the US military (effectively as mercenaries) to attack [20] groups affiliated to al-Qaida.

On the first issue, in addition to the 26,000 prisoners are being held by the Iraqi authorities, 24,000 people have been detained by US forces in a series of overcrowded camps, including (even after its supposed closure in 2007) Abu Ghraib (see Solomon Moore, "Thousands of New Prisoners Overwhelm Iraqi System [21]", *New York Times*, 14 February 2008). From an American perspective, the holding of such large numbers of prisoners is an integral part of the surge and a crucial aspect of controlling an insurgency attributed largely to al-Qaida influence and therefore a manifestation of international terrorism. The view from a *Sunni* Iraqi perspective is entirely different - that these are people illicitly detained [22] by an occupying power as they act to oppose that occupation. Those 24,000 people will have at least twenty times that number of family and close friends, many of whom will be further alienated by what has happened to one of their number.

On the second issue, there are discomfiting signs that the *Sunni* volunteer forces armed and paid by the United States to contain al-Qaida elements are far from reliable or stable "allies" (see Sudarsan Raghavan & Amit R Paley, "Sunni Forces Losing Patience with U.S. [23]", *Washington Post*, 28 February 2008). The approximately 80,000 *Sunnis* recruited and deployed in this effort have become a key part of the surge"strategy; but their links to their American patrons are instrumental. The *Shi'a*-dominated central government for the most part resists their integration into the Iraqi army or police force, ensuring that many of these militiamen will have few prospects of longer-term employment after their immediate task is concluded. Whatever their short-term utility [24], therefore, the *Sunni* volunteer groups may in the longer term represent a large cohort of young men with military training and experience but no loyalty to the new Iraqi institutions of state.

The visit to Iraq of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on 2-3 March 2008 [25] - the first by an Iranian leader since 1979, before the war [26] of 1980-88 between the two countries launched by Saddam Hussein - comes at a delicate moment in this respect. The close historical and religious links between *Shi'a* Iraq and *Shi'a* Iran are an important part of the background here, but more significant in current political terms is the apprehension among many *Sunnis* that a consolidated relationship [27] with Iran is likely further to diminish their influence within the Iraqi government. The internal political balance in Iraq - reflected too in the fact that Ahmadinejad was welcomed [28] by the Kurdish president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani - remains a matter of intense negotiation and calculation among groups contending [29] for influence and power; and *Sunni* Iraq is at the heart of this process.

Global narratives

In a wider context, the fundamental reality is that Iraq is (and is seen as being, both inside and outside the country) as under foreign occupation. This narrative is a stubborn counterweight to the one emanating from Washington (especially, though not exclusively, from neo-conservative circles [30]): that after five difficult years a transformative victory is at hand.

The political and media power of the "victory" narrative, allied to its ruthless selectivity of focus, means that it could very well survive the next eight months and the election of a new president in the United States. At the same time, the range and depth of the problems in several theatres of the war on terror - Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere - may prove so intractable that they collectively dissolve the mirage. What is certain is that the incoming president - whoever he or she is - will face far greater problems than Washington seems at present able to contemplate.

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