

Kaleidoscope, not telescope: Iraq, the Middle East, and the US

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The agreement reached between the UN inspectors and the Iraqis in Vienna this week relates primarily to an Iraqi acceptance of previous agreements dating back four years. These appear to allow inspectors unfettered access to all sites apart from the presidential palaces where notice would have to be given. It is an agreement that is clearly unacceptable to Washington where a new Security Council resolution is sought that would set far harder terms for the inspection process.

Key among these would be a full Iraqi declaration on all weapons issues, with the prospect of military action if inspectors got any indication at all that the declaration was incomplete. Given Russian opposition to a new resolution this may be difficult to achieve, setting the scene for some extremely complicated diplomacy that could well lead to the Bush administration downgrading its commitment to the UN route. This, in turn, could make life somewhat uncomfortable for UK government of Tony Blair.

More generally, though, there are quite different pointers to US intentions now emerging, together with some surprising developments among Middle Eastern states.

The US prepares for war

On the US side, the build-up to war is proceeding at a steady pace so that, as things stand, a full-scale attack on Iraq will be possible by February but could be brought forward. According to a recent detailed assessment in the 23 September issue of *Aviation Week* [1] everything is under way, with one view being that inspection may well start but would rapidly stall.

The journal quotes a US Air Force official: "Iraq's agreement on inspections will buy them no more than thirty days [from when inspections start]. They will start interfering and, when they do, the inspectors will be withdrawn immediately and the bombing will start the next day."

There are numerous indications of the build-up, not least that what was assumed to be the temporary forward-basing of an air operations centre in Qatar is likely to be made permanent. About 600 Central Command staff will be involved, together with 400 people from other US commands and from Britain as well. The fact that UK personnel will be an integral part of this build-up is a strong indicator of a UK commitment to military action, should it come to that.

In terms of munitions, there has been a huge increase in production of precision-guided JDAM and Hellfire missiles. Significantly, many of the latter are being equipped with blast-fragmentation warheads that are used particularly for attacking buildings. If armour-piercing warheads are used, they simply go right through the buildings without exploding. This alone is an indication that US war planning is presuming an emphasis on urban warfare in Baghdad, Tikrit, Basra and elsewhere.

Another indicator of anticipated urban warfare is the rapid development and production of fuel–air explosives, successors to napalm and now described by the more anodyne term "thermobaric weapons". The BLU–118/B laser–guided thermobaric bomb was used in the attacks on Tora Bora in Afghanistan early this year and could be used both against buildings and underground targets in Iraq.

These indicators, together with the build–up of ground, air and naval forces in the region, all demonstrate a readiness to go to war, as does the recent increase in bombing raids on southern Iraq, now running at a rate much higher than for several years.

At the same time, there are four other developments that need to be looked at in any attempt to analyse what might happen over the crucial period of the next few months.

A challenge to morale?

In addition to its traditional commitments, the United States is building up forces in the Gulf while it maintains several thousand troops in Afghanistan and also makes some of its bases in Central Asia permanent. At the same time it is earmarking Air Force and Marine Corps units for homeland defence while maintaining a high level of counter–insurgency training and support in around fifty countries.

This all means considerable pressure on reserve forces. According to the *Washington Post* (26 September) about 130,000 reservists were called up after last September's attacks, the largest number since the 1991 Gulf War. Nearly 75,000 are currently on active duty. Another 100,000 could be called up in the event of an attack on Iraq, but the immediate problem is the length of service that these volunteers are having to face, causing some quite serious morale problems.

The issue here is that the immediate response of reservists to the 11 September attacks was extremely positive, and this was largely maintained during the war in Afghanistan. For now, there is reasonably strong support for action against Iraq, although not at the same level as against al–Qaida and the Taliban. This may not last, especially if Al Gore's recent speech (highlighted by Todd Gitlin in the current issue of **openDemocracy**) does lead to a much more vigorous debate in the US. In such circumstances, considerable problems of morale among reservists could well develop.

The prospect of urban warfare

Also in relation to a war with Iraq, there are clearer indications that the Iraqi strategy would involve concerted attempts to draw US forces into urban warfare, with all the casualty implications. This could be made more problematic by the delegation of authority to use chemical and biological weapons, making their early use more likely.

Even while the regime allows the inspection process to begin, it will be assuming that this will not deter the US from an attack and will therefore be undertaking emergency weaponisation, especially of biological and chemical stocks, just as it did in 1990.

If any of this becomes clear, either to the inspectors or to US intelligence, it will almost certainly be used as an immediate justification for war. What this means is that even if the inspection process gets under way, there could be a sudden crisis escalating into war at very short notice, at any time in the next few months.

Israel and Lebanon

While the main focus is on Iraq, three issues in relation to Israel have to be kept in mind. One is the Israeli assault on Arafat's Ramallah compound, adding further fuel to the anti-Israeli and anti-American feeling in the region. This, in turn is compounded by moves in Congress to focus the US diplomatic presence in Israel on Jerusalem instead of Tel Aviv. Although this may not involve concrete changes in the short term, the very fact that Congress is considering this is seen as an affront to the Palestinians, implying that Israeli control of Jerusalem as their capital city is not negotiable.

Meanwhile there are very strong signs of a substantial build-up of missile forces among the Hizbullah militia in southern Lebanon. It is believed that some thousands of short-range missiles have been moved to the region from Iran via Damascus, with some of these having sufficient range to hit Israel's northern cities.

The reason for this is not clear, but it means that if war with Iraq breaks out, and Israeli forces become engaged in that war in any shape or form, they may suddenly find themselves having to confront action from Hizbullah, as well as having to maintain control of the occupied territories. Given Sharon's particularly hard-line security posture, action by Hizbullah could involve Israeli responses that target Syrian positions, setting the scene for an unstable escalation.

A regional dialogue

The final recent development is the remarkable series of intergovernmental meetings that have been conducted between states in the region. They include meetings involving Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Most of them have been bilateral but they have frequently involved heads of state and together they suggest that there may be some serious consensus-building being attempted.

It may come to nothing, but it is an unexpected counter to the assumption that Middle Eastern states will all come into line behind the United States if they see that Washington is intent on war.

All in all, what we are seeing is a degree of complexity, both in the UN and the region, that is in remarkable contrast to the view from the Washington security community that regime termination in Baghdad is essential, come what may. The United States may be the world's only superpower, but it may find that its freedom of action might not be quite as strong as anticipated.

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