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Iraq: What is to Be Done

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It may not be as apparent in the US as it is in the Arab world, but several weeks of travel in the region indicate that the course of the fighting in Fallujah and Najaf are perceived in much of Iraq and the Arab world as a serious US defeat. This is not simply a matter of shattering an aura of US military invincibility; it is a growing shift in political attitudes and in the prospects for political change in Iraq.

It is also all too clear that any idea the US is engaging in “post-conflict operations” is little more than a farce. The shock of Saddam’s fall produced a brief period of near paralysis in the Iraqi opposition to the US and the Coalition. By August 2003, however, a state of low intensity conflict clearly existed in Iraq, and the level of this conflict has escalated ever since January of 2004.

In fact, this follows a pattern that makes the very term “post-conflict operations” a stupid and intellectually dishonest oxymoron. As we have seen in Afghanistan, Somalia, Lebanon, Cambodia, and many other cases, asymmetric wars do not really end. Nation building must take place on an armed basis without security and in the face of adaptive and innovative threats. The reality is that this is a far more difficult aspect of “transformation” than defeating organized military resistance, and one for which the US is not yet prepared.

Senior US officials have been in a continuing state of denial about the depth of support for this conflict. They have misused public opinion polls like the Zogby and ABC polls and they have ignored the fact that the ABC poll conducted in February found that roughly two thirds of Sunnis and one third of Shi’ites opposed the US and British invasion and found it to be humiliating to Iraq. Senior US officials have ignored the fact that roughly one-third of Sunnis and two-thirds of Shi’ites support violence against the Coalition and want the Coalition forces to leave Iraq immediately. They talk about a small minority of Iraqis because only a small minority have so far been actively violent – a reality in virtually every insurgent campaign and one that in no way is a measure of support for violence.

A year into the “war after the war,” far too many US officials are still in a state of denial as to the political realities in the Middle East. They do not see just how much the perceived US tilt towards Israel and Sharon alienates Iraqis and Arabs in general. They do not admit the near total failure of US information operations, and the fact that Iraqis watch hostile Arab satellite TV stations and rely on papers filled with misinformation and conspiracy theories.

They talk about “success” in aid programs measured in terms of contracts signed, fiscal obligations, and gross measures of performance like megawatts; not about actual progress on the ground the kind that can really win hearts and minds. They cannot understand that US calls for “liberty,” “democracy,” and “reform” have become coupled to images of US interference in Arab regimes, the broad resentment of careless negative US references to Islam and Arab culture, and conspiracy theories about control of Iraqi oil, “neoimperialism,” and serving “Zionist” interests.

The fact these perceptions are not fair is as irrelevant as US tactical military victories that are often political defeats. The present mix of armed nation building and low intensity conflict takes place in a region shaped by such perceptions. This is why the photographic evidence of US mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners is so devastating. For many in the region, it validates every criticism of the US, and vastly strengthens the hand of Islamic extremists, Sunni insurgents, Shi'ite insurgents, and hostile media and intellectuals in both the Arab world and Europe.

The time has come to face this reality. There was never a time when neoconservative fantasies about the Middle East were anything but dangerous illusions. Those fantasies have killed and wounded thousands of American and Coalition allies, and now threaten the US with a serious strategic defeat. It may not be possible to avoid some form of defeat, but the US must make every effort to do so, and this means junking the neoconservatism within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Vice President's office, and the NSC and coming firmly to grips with reality.

Why the US Has Already “Lost” Some Aspects of its Battles in Fallujah and with Sadr

The US is scarcely defeated in either a military or a political sense, but it is suffering serious reversals. The Iraqi insurgents do not have to win battles in a tactical sense; they merely have to put up a determined enough resistance, with enough skill and courage, to show their fellow Iraqis and the Arab world that they are capable of a determined, strong and well-organized effort. Many of their fellow Iraqis will perceive any determined resistance as a “victory” against the world's only superpower.

If the Sunnis in Fallujah, and Sadr in Najaf, continue to show they can survive a US military threat—and that they can force the US and Coalition into a posture of containment and compromise—they will be able to change the rules of the game in nation building as well as in the fighting. They will score a major victory at the political level while they effectively create “no go” areas and sanctuaries. They will do so even if they do have to end open confrontation and turnover some weapons and activists.

Solutions like the “Fallujah Brigade” are de facto defeats for the US in both military and political terms. They signal a coming struggle for power in which hostile elements of both Arab Sunnis and Shi'ites will be much stronger than the US and its allies previously estimated. They also create a national political climate in which the Coalition is perceived as lacking any clear plan or goals, the Interim governing Council is divided and lacking in legitimacy, the Iraqi security forces are seen as ineffective, and the UN becomes both a tool for insurgent pressure and a potential target.

Losing a War of Attrition in a “Perfect Storm” of Negative Images?

The fighting during April 2004 has also created a climate in which the US and its allies are seen as being in the middle of a war of attrition that they are losing. The totals of US,

allied, and friendly Iraqi killed and wounded have already reached the point where Iraqi insurgents and foreign extremists have every reason to perceive the Coalition as politically and strategically vulnerable – an image reinforced by the steady loss of support for the war and a continued effort in Iraq in US and allied public opinion polls.

Hostile Iraqi losses to date can be sustained indefinitely. As a result, the mix of Coalition and friendly Iraqi casualties, sabotage and paralysis of the aid process, and growing political uncertainty at the edge of the transfer of sovereignty act as a virtual road map for future battles in Iraq and later battles against US military and nation building operations in the rest of the world. The end result is to show that an Arab asymmetric force can delay and possibly checkmate the strongest Western military power, that Arabs are not weak or passive, and that Arabs can “take back their homeland.”

It will take a new public opinion poll to determine just how much the “perfect storm” of negative events since February has changed opinion inside Iraq, but it seems almost certain that events in Fallujah and dealing with Sadr have sharply cut support for the US among moderate Iraqi Arabs. (The fact the Kurds have nowhere else to go—and have to be friendly—means they should be largely excluded from polls analyzing how Iraqi attitudes are affecting the war.)

It seems equally certain that this drop is compounded by the flood of Arab images of Iraqi civilians suffering in the fighting, the images of mistreatment of Iraqi POWs, and newscasts that claim every US use of a modern weapon is a careless use of excessive force. These images are clearly having a powerful impact throughout the Sunni world -- strongly reinforced by Israeli military action and statements that make the constant Arab media linkage between the US and Israeli occupations steadily more damaging. Furthermore, similar images are being portrayed in Iran and it seems likely that Iranian opinion is turning away from the US.

The Lack of Coalition and IGC Political Legitimacy

The last few weeks of resistance have sharply undercut the already low political legitimacy of the CPA, the US approach to nation building, and the Interim Governing Council. Iraqis and the region perceive the US as lacking any credible plan of action and as being “forced” to turn to the UN.

The “pro-American” Iraqis have been divided and weak, and have been unable to rally the Iraqi people. The end result is that the US ability to convey “legitimacy” has been sharply undercut at precisely at the time the US needs legitimacy for its June 30 turnover. In addition, US ties to some members of the IGC are becoming steadily more damaging--particularly the image of US ties to “losers” like Chalibi.

Turning a Non-terrorist Threat into a Real One

Iraq has become a natural battleground for Islamic insurgents and “volunteers” of all persuasions. There is no meaningful evidence that Iraq was a focus of terrorism before

the war, or a primary focus early in the fighting. Over the last few months, however, the outside presence and support for insurgents has increased.

Over the last few weeks, it has become all too clear that such support is paying off well in terms of American and allied casualties, and in boosting the image of Islamic resistance as being able to take on the US. Iraq was never a magnet for terrorism before the war, and only a limited magnet before Fallujah and Sadr. It has become a major magnet now.

Paralyzing Much of the Effort to Win Hearts and Minds

Much of the aid and economic development program has been paralyzed, and the economic security of the Shi'ite areas and oil exports is now far more at risk. The US reliance on contractors, rather than Iraqis, makes everyone involved in aid and reconstruction a natural target. The use of contract security has created the image of mercenary forces, and efforts to win hearts and minds in troubled areas have essentially collapsed, as they have in some formerly "friendly areas" as well.

The flood of aid that should have helped win hearts and minds during a critical period of political transition is often little more than a trickle.

A Negotiated Solution Means Limiting the Scale of Defeat

The end result is close to a no win situation for the US: Any negotiated solution effectively legitimizes the Sunni and Shi'ite hard-line opposition, while weakening the IGC—exposing the fact the US is now trying to turnover power to "mystery men" on June 30, who cannot have legitimacy because they have no identity.

This compounds the problems inherent in the Ibrahimi approach, which effectively says that the government of June 30 will not have legitimacy until a popular council takes place, and that a real government and constitutional base must be voted on by the Iraqis and not from the legacy left by the CPA/IGC.

In effect, the period of political illegitimacy or non-legitimacy is now extended long beyond June 30th, and the period in which Iraqis must compete for power by both political and violent means will now extend through all of 2004 and much of 2005.

This political struggle has several key characteristics:

- The game has no clear rules. There are "maybe" milestones and objectives that are undefined.
- Federalism and power sharing is up in the air, and even if an interim allocation of power to a President, Prime Minister, and Vice Premiers takes place, it is only for an interim period and does not affect struggles over money, power, land, etc. The ethnic divisions between Arab, Kurd, Turcoman, and other minorities are not

really resolved. The same is true of divisions between Sunni and Shi'ite, and religious and secular.

- There is no economic underpinning for political stability, and far too many jobs are dependent on aid and paid security positions. Iraq now has a “bubble” economy, not real reconstruction, and Iraqis know this. Some 70% expressed fear over their future job security in the ABC poll in February.
- No Iraqi leaders now have broad popular political support in public opinion polls, including Sistani. Most have powerful negatives – often more negative than positive. There is usually intense competition within given factions, and leaders have a growing incentive to show their independence from the Coalition. A near political vacuum exists where there are strong incentives to seek support from ethnic or religious factions and demagogue the way to victory.
- No political party has significant popular support, and nearly 70% of Iraqis opposed political parties in the ABC poll in February, largely because of the heritage of the Baath.
- More Iraqis support a strong leader as an interim solution than “democracy,” although no one is clear on who such a strong leader will be.
- No Iraqi leader is as yet organizing for the series of elections to come, aggressively trying to create popular political parties, or making efforts to capture the media. The peaceful political struggles necessary to create the ground work for democracy are being subordinated to political struggles within the IGC, efforts to game Ibrahimi’s political efforts, and challenges from the outside.
- Many potential Iraqi leaders have every reason to fear losing in the coming struggle for power, and no clear plans exist to coopt the Sunni insurgents and Shi'ite “Sadrs” into the system. Hostile areas and factions are largely excluded from the political process under the illusion they are too small to really matter. The US still seems to be trying to stage-manage the creation of a secular democracy of friendly moderates, but true legitimacy is the government Iraqis want, not the one the US and Western reformers want.
- There is no meaningful chance of “security first.” The political and nation building process will almost certainly have to go on in the midst of terrorism and low intensity conflict through 2006. Elections will be extremely difficult, hostile areas will continue to exist, and governance will be under continued attack.
- The rush to create Iraqi armed forces and security forces suitable for a post conflict Iraq has left tens of thousands of untrained and poorly equipped men recruited locally on an ethnic, religious, and tribal basis. No clear plan seems to exist for giving them the training, equipment, and facilities they need on a timely basis. The rule of law is erratic and often local.

- Politics may fascinate politicians, but Iraqis live with governance. The creation of 25-27 functioning ministries, governorates, and urban governments will affect every aspect of daily life and security. The plans to create effective governance will lag far behind the transfer of sovereignty on June 30—and extend well into the winter of 2004 and beyond.

No Military Solution Can Now Work

In retrospect, the US might have been far better off to act decisively in hot pursuit in both Fallujah and in dealing with Sadr. Certainly, the military effort and the casualties would have been far smaller, the political momentum of support for the insurgents would not have had time to build, and any criticism would have been tempered with reluctance to challenge the US again. That was then, however, and this is now.

The US can defeat any given group of Iraqi insurgents and largely secure any area it occupies with sufficient strength. However, any military solution that involves serious combat with a Sunni or Shi'ite faction is now likely to be the kind of "victory" that creates a new firestorm over excessive force, civilian casualties, and collateral damage. At the same time, the US cannot hope to use such combat to kill or arrest all of the Sunni, Shi'ite, and foreign insurgents that exist now and many tactical victories are likely to create more insurgents than they destroy. As the US learned in Vietnam, tactical military victory without political victory is large irrelevant.

As in Vietnam, the US also cannot afford to lose the largest ethnic faction. In Vietnam, the US arguably lost the war when it lost the Buddhists. In Iraq, the key is to avoid losing the Shi'ites. Any US arrest or killing of Sadr at this point means creating an instant martyr that will have a powerful impact on many young Shi'ites in Iraq, and militant Shi'ites all over the world -- pushing them towards some form of alignment with Sunni insurgents. A serious fight from a now cold start against a well organized resistance in Najaf would be a disaster, triggering much broader Shi'ite alignments against the US.

What the US Should Do Now

At this point, the US lacks good options -- although it probably never really had them in the sense the Bush Administration sought. The option of quickly turning Iraq into a successful, free market democracy was never practical, and was as absurd a neoconservative fantasy as the idea that success in this objective would magically make Iraq an example that would transform the Middle East.

The key to the success the US can now hope to achieve is to set realistic objectives. In practice, these objectives are to create an Iraqi political structure that will minimize the risk of civil war, develop some degree of pluralism, and help the Iraqis take charge over their own economy.

This, in turn, means a major shift from trying to maintain US influence and leverage in a post sovereignty period to a policy where the US makes every effort to turn as much of the political, aid, and security effort over to Iraqis as soon as possible, and focuses on supporting the UN in creating the best compromises possible in creating Iraqi political legitimacy.

The US should not abandon Iraq, but rather abandon the effort to create an Iraq in its own image.

Other measures are:

- Accept the fact that a universal, nation-wide “security first” policy is stupid and impractical, and that the US needs to isolate and bypass islands of resistance, and focus on creating a legitimate Iraqi government that can unify Iraqis and allow nation building to work. This means relying on containment in the case of truly troubled and high insurgent areas, and focusing on security in friendly areas.
- Accept the fact there is no way to “drain the swamp.” At this point, there simply is no way to eliminate cadres of insurgents or to disarm the most threatening areas. Fallujah and similar areas have too much popular support for the insurgents, there are too many arms that can be hidden, and too many points of vulnerability. This does not mean the US should give up fighting the insurgents or its efforts to disarm them. It does mean the US must accept that it cannot win in the sense of eliminating them or turning hostile areas into secure and disarmed areas.
- Rush aid to the Iraqi security forces and military seeking more friendly Arab aid in training and support, and provide as broad a base of Iraqi command as possible. Forget contract regulations on buying equipment. Deliver everything necessary and worry about the details later.
- Continue expanding the role of the Iraqi security forces. Understand that their loyalties will be divided, that putting them in charge of hostile areas does not mean they can be expected to do more than work out a modus vivendi with the insurgents, and that the end result will often be to create “no go” or limited access areas for Americans. The US cannot afford to repeat the Israeli mistake of assuming that any Iraqi authority in hostile areas can be counted on to provide security for Americans.
- Walk firmly and openly away from the losers in the IGC like Chalibi. Open up the political structure and deal with Shi’ite oppositionists, Sunni insurgents, ex-Baathists to the maximum degree possible. Drag in as many non-IGC leaders as possible, and give Ibrahimi’s council idea the strongest possible support. Lower the US profile in shaping the political future of Iraq as much as possible and bring in as broad a UN international team as possible.
- Focus on all of the Shi’ites, not just the friendly ones. Make this a critical aspect of US diplomatic efforts. Let the Iraqi Shi’ites deal with Sadr and stay

out of internal Shi'ite disputes, except to help insure security. Quietly reach out to Iran to create whatever kind of dialogue is possible.

- Push Sunni Arab states into helping Iraq's Sunnis and in helping to deal with the political issues involved by quietly making it clear that they will have to live with the aftermath of failure and that the US presence and commitment is not open-ended.
- Zero-base the failed contracting effort for FY2004 US aid to put Iraqi Ministries and officials in charge of the aid process as soon as possible, with Iraqis going into the field and not foreign contractors.
- Reprogram funds for a massive new CERF program to enable US military commanders to use dollars instead of bullets at every opportunity. Make the focus of US control over aid whether Iraqis spend the money honestly and effectively, and not on US control, plans, and objectives.
- Zero-base the US embassy plan to create the smallest staff practical of proven area experts, with the clear message to the Iraqis that not only are they going to be in charge, but non-performance means no US money and no continuation of US troops and support. End the image of a US end of an occupation after the occupation.
- Develop a long-term economic and military aid program as leverage to try to influence Iraqi decision making over time. Have the ministries manage the process, not USAID or contractors. Focus on whether the Iraqi efforts are honest and produce real results. Do not try to use aid to force Iraq into US modes and methods.
- Accept the near total failure of US information operations. Stop giving all CPA/CJTF-7 press conferences, and put an Iraqi on the stage with the US spokesmen. Stop all procounsel-like press conferences where the US seems to be dictating. Make an Iraqi spokesman part of all dialogue, and give them the lead as soon as possible. Subordinate US and Coalition spokesmen as soon as possible to Iraqis in press conferences and briefings that are held in Arabic.
- Look at the broader failures of US policy in the region. Revitalize the Road Map and the Quartet in the light of Sharon's problems. Deal with the reality that there are two failed sets of political elites in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that settlements should be unacceptable and not just terrorism.
- Abandon the Greater Middle East Initiative in its present form. Do not add another strategic and policy blunder to the present situation by appearing to call for regime change and seeking to dominate the region. Focus on a broad cooperative initiative worked out with the EU and where the EU puts pressure on the Arab League. Stop talking about region-wide democracy and liberty before there are responsible political parties and the other reforms necessary to make democracy work. Focus on a country-by-country approach to reform that considers human rights, economic welfare, and demographic issues to be

at least as important as elections. Stress cooperation in “evolution;” not random efforts at “revolution.”

Prepare for the fact that nation building may still fail, and position the US to use the threat of withdrawal as leverage. Make it clear that the US can and will leave Iraq if the Iraqis do not reach agreement on an effective interim solution and if they do not proceed with reasonable unity to implement the UN plans.

The US position should be that the US is ready to help an Iraq that will help itself, and that it supports a true transfer of sovereignty. It should make it clear to Iraq and the world, however, that the US has a clear exit strategy. It has no interest in bases or control over Iraqi oil. It has no reason to stay if Iraq become unstable, devolves into civil war, or ends up under a strong man. The US can live with a weak or unstable Iraq, and Iraq still will have to export oil at market prices and will still be far less of a threat than Saddam’s Iraq.