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What is Next in Iraq?

Military Developments, Military Requirements and Armed Nation Building

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It now seems likely that the US will face some form of low intensity conflict in Iraq for at least 6-12 more months. No one can predict when or how such fighting will develop or how it will end. It is clear, however, that several issues badly need to be addressed.

Who Is The Enemy?

There is an ongoing debate among US government and outside experts over who the enemy is, and the relative strength and role of Saddam/Ba'ath loyalists, postwar Iraqi nationalists, Iraqi Sunni groups, outside Arab volunteers, and outside organized Islamic extremists groups – some of which have at least loose ties to Al Qaida.

The problem is that all of these groups are involved to some degree, and it is almost impossible to make an accurate count or assessment of the strength, role, and trends in any one element. Intelligence analysts are speculating on the basis of their favorite threat, conspiracy theories abound, and the media seem ready to print or air virtually halfway convincing story.

The White House also is clearly trying to put a political spin on the issue of defining the enemy for both domestic and foreign political reasons by labeling the opposition as “terrorists” and linking it as much as possible to Afghanistan, outside Islamic extremists and Al Qaida. “Terrorism” is a hot button word that condemns the attackers, ties them to 9/11, avoids any mention of nationalism and the problems in nation building, avoids the issue of why the US wasn't better prepared to deal with the problem right after the war, and presumably wins more international support. Anti-terrorism is popular; Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia are not.

In balance, the US forces and analysts most involved (a) admit on background that they have no real numbers and the situation is constantly evolving, (b) see some kind of loose regional coordination but cannot identify its scale and structure with any detail, (c) see the Iraqi threat as still more pro-Saddam and Ba'athist than Islamic but note there is no clear separation between the groups, (d) see a loose structure of cooperation between diverse groups that do not share a common agenda other than anger or hatred of the US and secular change, (e) see growing numbers of young Sunni Iraqis entering the opposition as part of a postwar reaction to the US failures in nation building, (f) do see outside volunteers and speculate that 50-200 Al Ansar have returned, and (g) see the numbers of serious hostile cadres involved as a still very small but admit no meaningful numbers are possible.

Key Areas of Uncertainty

No consensus seems to be emerging over several very important issues:

- **Whether getting Saddam and the entire “deck of cards” would make a major difference or simply push more power down to the emerging hostile**

nationalists and domestic/Islamists. Best guess: A pause, short-term decline in hostility and resurgence unless nation building takes hold.

- **How large the stocks of surplus weapons, bombs, explosives, etc. are, and how important they are.** The US keeps finding large caches, but the supply base may be so extensive that this is about as useful as the drug seizures in the war on drugs. Best guess: 6-12 months before outside supply becomes a serious issue and it may never be important if sabotage and improvised explosive devises can paralyze nation building.
- **The seriousness of the anti-US/anti-coalition feeling among current and potential Iraq Sunni activists and the extent to which failures in nation building and US tactical mistakes are broadening at least the short term base of true hostiles.** The feeling seems to be that cadres are growing but not sharply, and the US is having nation building is making some progress. At the same time. Analysts note that public opinion polls are often irrelevant because it only takes a small percent of hostiles to sustain a low intensity conflict, and that the Iraqis are more “angry neutrals” than favorable to the US.
- **The risk the struggle will broaden to include the Shiites in the South. No consensus of any kind.** Best guess: At least one chance in three of some significant outbreaks from Shi’ite elements.
- **Is Iraq becoming the central focus of Islamic extremist movements?** Opinion is divided, but general view is a sharp no. The fighting is stepping up in Afghanistan, and most Islamist movements are national and do not change their focus over time. Al Qaida is certainly deeply interested, but has many other targets. An Islamist target? Yes. A central focus? No.
- **The importance of domestic versus foreign Islamic elements:** Once again, opinion is divided and complicated by the fact so many Islamic elements talk about Iraq and make grandiose statements. The balance of opinion seems to be that native Iraqi Islamists are emerging in a strength equal to those of foreign elements, that many foreign volunteers do not have clear ongoing ties to outside organization, and that Al Ansar and other organized groups have a limited, but real presence.

The Need for More Troops

Much of the debate over the war in Iraq is turning to whether the US should send in more troops and/or seek to expand the role of the UN and get more foreign troops. The present "sound bite" approach to this issue in the media tends to report on one of three over-simplified and unrealistic positions regarding these issues.

- **More US Troops and A Larger Army:** The first position calls for more US troops, and directly or indirectly, for a larger US Army. The reasons for this call

are often driven more by the general overstretch of US forces than by an analysis of what is really needed in Iraq. There also is a "finally the Army's time has come" character to some of the arguments -- rather ironic after the focus on airpower during the Afghan War and the immediate aftermath of the fighting to overthrow Saddam's regime.

The problem with these arguments is that the entire US force structure is under severe pressure in spite of major increases in defense spending. More US Army forces take time and money to create and may not be ready in time. Spending on the Army either means larger budget deficits or cuts in the Marines, Navy and Air Force. The Air Force and Navy too have taken a 40%+ cut in deployable active forces

- **Going to the UN:** The second position -- the pro-UN argument -- often focuses more on the feeling the Bush Administration is ignoring the international community, has alienated some of our allies, than on the missions that must be performed. It often has an ideological character, and argues for a UN role and "UN troops" without considering who will really provide these troops and what their capabilities and costs will be. The usual suspects are France, Germany, Turkey, and India.

The problem with these arguments is that this is not some kind of guard duty enforcing an agreed peace but an active low-intensity conflict where forces need training and experience and have to cooperate in ongoing counter-guerrilla and counter-terrorist operations in at least the center of Iraq. War and armed nation building do require manpower per se. They require focused and coordinated efforts that cannot be run by a giant committee or carried out by inexperienced troops.

Most foreign troops will also bring a political agenda with them, demands for a role in nation building decisions, and add problems in terms of logistic and transportation support, financial support, language skills, and command and control. There already is a linguistic, support, and command problem of major dimensions. Work by Brian Hartman of ABC News shows there are 31 countries with troops there... or getting there soon. They total up to about 24,000, but only Britain has a large, cohesive force of some 11,000. Poland has 2,400, the Ukraine has 1,800, Spain has 1,300, Italy 1,130, and the Netherlands has 1,100. The other 25 countries have 24 different languages, lack standardized communications, and generally require US logistic and transportation support.

- **We don't need more outside troops; we need Iraqis:** The third position is the official one. Secretary Rumsfeld has said the senior military leadership (Joint Chiefs?) have advised him that more troops are not yet needed, and has said that the US should expand the role of the Iraqis in defending the nation building effort.

The validity of these arguments lies in the fact that 300,000 young men and women who lack proper training, language skills, and area expertise are not twice as good as 150,000. In fact, simply throwing more warm bodies into the mix – all of which require force protection and support --, and may complicate the problem more than they are worth. Force quality is clearly more important than force quantity, and alienating more of the Iraqi people is a risk the US cannot afford.

One key problem with these arguments is that they are really driven by whether we need more US troops, but rather by whether we can afford to send more troops. There really aren't that many skilled troops available. The US has another war in Afghanistan and must retain contingency capability for other missions. It cannot develop more trained troops in less than a year, and it may well be able to create a more efficient Army force structure and free existing troops for the mission in that time. The reserves are already overstretched, a growing political problem, and often have readiness limitations. It would also be ideal for the US to be able to rely more on Iraqis.

Another key problem is that Iraqis take time to train, present serious political problems, and are better suited to guard duty than really defending and/or hunting down attackers.

The Mission: Offense, Not Defense, Wins

The real answer is that none of these positions are likely to be adequate. The key missions the US and its allies must succeed in are (a) develop the offensive capability to win a low intensity conflict in central Iraq, (b) carry out armed nation building in that area, and (c) prevent the broadening of the war to include the Shi'ites and ethnic/sectarian fighting in the north. The US and its allies must also begin immediately. They cannot wait to create new forces and cadres, or bring in troops from the outside.

The Key Mission is Expert Offense

The US must seek to win as quickly as possible and it cannot win in Iraq by fighting on the defense. There is no conceivable way it US can protect everything or even enough by focusing on defensive action. It must provide security for its own presence, allies and international organizations, contractors, and friendly Iraqis. It must protect the key links in infrastructure and the economy. Unless it can hunt down and seize or kill the opposition, however, it will always see new successful attacks and sabotage.

The key to winning in this offensive mission is not numbers, but intelligence, skilled cadres of expert troops, area and language specialists, mixed with constant civic action and political warfare to win hearts and minds. This is a totally different force from precision air strikes but still a very expert and very disciplined one. Force quality counts and not force quantity. In fact, the smaller and more surgical US offensive operations are, the better.

In hostile areas, the need is for more informed, well-trained and disciplined, and restrained armed protection of nation building along with civic action. Quality troops that have the skills and training to work beside, and with, Iraqis are critical. Isolated force-protection oriented cadres are often a liability.

In both aspects of these missions, coordination and speed of reaction will be critical. The time will not be available for political coordination, interoperability, and language problems.

Armed Nation Building Must be Done on a “Flood Forward” Basis

At best, an offensive victory is likely to take a minimum of 8-12 more months to prove security in Iraq -- *if the war does not broaden to include the Shi'ites*. In the interim, the US must carry out and defend armed nation building, at least in central Iraq.

Losses are going to occur, and repairs and reconstruction will constantly be at risk. No one can anticipate what will be destroyed and popular patience will be at a minimum.

Success will mean reshaping nation building to anticipate a constant flow of sabotage, focus looting, and attacks on soft targets. It will mean throwing enough resources at the problem to overwhelm the pace of attacks. It will mean forgetting about oil revenues, about securitizing, and minimizing short-term costs.

In Iraq, “cost-effectiveness” will be a synonym for defeat, and doing things on the cheap will be a recipe for constant vulnerability. “Win through waste” has always been the secret American recipe for victory; it will be in this case as well.

At the same time, the best way to both carry out nation building and protect will be to involve as many Iraqis in planning and executing such activities as possible. It will be to show the Iraqi people they are in charge and they are responsible.

This does create an area where more foreign troops could be useful; without requiring high levels of interoperability with US forces. It will be at least 3-6 months before enough Iraqi guards can assume most of the routine protection mission. In the interim a larger, and less expert, foreign troop presence could often be useful.

“Stupid Mission Tricks”

There are some “stupid mission tricks” the US and its allies should avoid:

- **Trying to block infiltration is fine and necessary, but no one who knows Iraq can talk seriously about securing its borders.** Iraq's borders are too long, too diverse, and open to infiltration by anyone or any group willing to move in as a civilian. Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iran all have areas where it would take vast manpower to cover the border as a whole, and in every

case terrorist cadres could come in as civilians into a nation with arms over the entire area.

- **Don't make Islam the Issue:** One of the keys to dealing with religious extremism is to be extremely careful not to attack Islam and confuse small elements of extremists with a religion and a culture. Careless references to terrorism, Islamists, etc. will compound the already serious problems the US faces in alienating the Islamic and Arab world.
- **Don't create problems with the Shi'ites:** The present war is likely to be lost or won on the basis of whether the Iraqi Shi'ites join in. The outside Iraqi opposition cannot do this; and the US must be ready to deal with Iraqi clerics. The US should be careful not to move more of its own troops into sensitive areas without a clear cause, or see allied troops come in.
- **Use both sticks and carrots in dealing with Iran:** The US needs to find some modus vivendi that minimizes action from Iran. This is an area where the British and Europe might well take the lead.
- **Don't tolerate quiet ethnic cleansing in the north:** The US cannot afford to have the Kurds alienate more Sunnis and the Turkomans.
- **Rush the Iraqis forward wherever possible:** The good may be the enemy of the acceptable. Winning hearts and minds means putting Iraqis in charge as fast as possible even at the cost of political compromises and problems in efficiency. Giving the Iraqis the Iraqis they want and can build is the goal, not meeting our objectives.
- **Take a hardline on Syria but a focused one:** The US cannot afford to get involved in Israel's priorities; it has its own. It should focus on blocking Syrian support of Iraqi and volunteer hostile elements, and not allow itself to be diverted over issues like the Hezbollah and Lebanon.
- **Remember regional allies like Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait:** It is far too easy to forget the role local powers can play in limiting infiltration, in provide intelligence and aid, and in helping to deal with Iraq's ethnic issues. This means hard bargaining with Turkey, and trying to rebuild working relations with Saudi Arabia.
- **Don't overreact in terms of force protection and casualties:** Hard as it may be, accept the fact that some casualties are the price of keeping the right profile, interacting with Iraqis, and moving nation building forward. The primary mission is not force protection, and everyone has to understand this.