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Iraq

Is the Empire being defeated?

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Despite all the media attention, the true scale of the Iraq conflict is concealed from the public in the West. What is happening is an utterly brutal all-out urban guerrilla war, with savage atrocities being committed by both sides. The scale of this is concealed with reports of "attacks" and "bombings", apparently by disparate bands of desperadoes. Only occasionally, as with the turning-point battle of Falluja in April, does anything like the real scale of the fighting and the extent of American casualties get fully reported in the press and on TV.

A few days before this article was written, on 25 and 26 June, a massive battle broke out in the city of Ba'qubah, sixty miles northwest of Baghdad. Dozens of resistance fighters occupied buildings in the centre of the city, including the local police headquarters. US forces launched a furious counter-attack, dropping 500-lb bombs and then sending in tanks and armoured personnel carriers, which rampaged through the city firing indiscriminately.

At the same time another huge battle was taking place in Falluja, after US troops tried to invade the city once again and eliminate resistance fighters. According to the correspondent of Mafkarat al-Islam, 30 US soldiers were killed in the initial assault and two Apache helicopters shot down. Resistance fighters ordered the evacuation of some popular neighbourhoods because of the scale of the civilian casualties. The battle in Ba'qubah was hardly reported in the US and British media, and the true scale of the fighting in Falluja minimised. Instead, while reporting bombings across the country, most of the news media concentrated on the Nato summit in Istanbul, and the fake hand-over of sovereignty to the interim Iraqi government. Older readers will remember this syndrome from the Vietnam War; news "management" by the military, media censorship and eventually media boredom with repetitious bad news, gives a fragmentary view of the reality on the ground.

Events this year have posed point-blank the ability of the US to win the guerrilla war, and in turn this puts in question the future scope of America's turn to unbridled militarism as the crucial mechanism for securing its world hegemony, as well as putting in question George Bush's re-election to the White House. In June, for the first time, opinion polls showed a majority of 53% either "somewhat dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with Bush's handling of Iraq.

A year ago the UK "Guardian" reported, "In a candid interview on the BBC's Breakfast with Frost, Mr Bremer said pockets of resistance in Iraq would be crushed. 'We are going to fight them and impose our will on them and we will capture or, if necessary, kill them until we have imposed law and order upon this country,' he said." One year on the "pockets of resistance" are all-out war.

There have been two decisive turning points this year, which have ensured that the United States cannot win this war - the April Battle of Falluja and the revelations about torture in Abu Ghraib prison. The former fatally damaged the US ability to win any significant support in Iraq, and the latter was a shattering blow, worldwide and in the United States itself, to US claims of moral superiority.

Battle of Falluja

It is now known that around 800 Iraqis, most of them civilians died in Falluja in the early days of April. An eye-witness account written at the time gives an impression of the reality of the fighting:

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"Falluja, Iraq, a low-rise, mostly Sunni city of about 200,000, has become this war's Sarajevo. I was there on Saturday and Sunday during what was supposed to be a cease-fire. Instead of calm, I found a city under siege from American artillery and snipers.

"At one of the city's clinics I saw dozens of freshly wounded women and children, victims of US Marine Corps munitions. Hospital officials report that more than 600 Iraqis have now been killed, most of them civilians. Two soccer fields in Falluja have been converted to graveyards. I went to Falluja with a small group of international journalists and NGO workers. We travelled in a large bus full of medical supplies; our plan was to unload our cargo, take a look around, then leave with as many wounded as we could take out with us.

"When we left Baghdad, the road was desolate and littered with the scorched and smouldering shells of vehicles. At the first US checkpoint, the soldiers said they'd been there for thirty hours straight. They looked exhausted and scared. After being searched, we continued along bumpy dirt roads, winding our way through parts of Abu Ghraib, steadily but slowly making our way toward besieged Falluja. At one point we passed a supply truck that had been hit and was being looted by people from a nearby village. Men and boys were running from the wreck carrying boxes. A small child yelled at our bus, "We will be mujahedeen until we die!"

"At one overpass we rolled by an M-1 tank that resistance fighters had destroyed. Smoke and flames still billowed from its burning guts. Down the road were more fires - the whole thirty kilometres to Falluja was strewn with burned-out fuel tankers, trucks, armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and tanks. As we approached Falluja we started running into mujahedeen checkpoints. Seeing our supplies and hearing that we were headed for Falluja, the guerrillas let us pass.

"Entering the city we saw a huge cloud from a US bomb. To our horror we realized there was no cease-fire. Falluja itself was virtually empty, aside from groups of mujahedeen fighters positioned on every other street corner, their faces covered by kaffiyehs. Many were armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles; some had rocket propelled grenade launchers. In all, I saw hundreds of Iraqi fighters." (Sarajevo on the Euphrates, Dahr Jamail, "The Nation", 12/040/04).

The savagery of the attack on Falluja shocked and angered ordinary Iraqis, including those in the Shi'ite south of the country, who lined up to give blood. American actions created a deepened legitimacy to the disparate forces of the muj (mujahadeen) as a genuine force of national resistance. At the same time, the appearance of hundreds of local mujahadeen fighters blew away claims that the resistance was simply "al-Qaida" or "remnants of the old regime". The true figures for American deaths in Falluja have not been revealed, but many western newspapers said that more than 100 marines had been killed in this battle. Of course, as usual, the casualties were disproportionately Iraqi - civilians and resistance fighters. But the battle itself was eerily reminiscent of urban battles, which took place during the Tet offensive in Vietnam in 1968.

The battle in Falluja was part of countrywide fighting, which took on the appearance of a national uprising. For sure, different factions were involved in the fighting, with different degrees of local support. While the resistance in Falluja and the Sunni triangle in general undoubtedly has widespread support, many reports say militia of the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr which fought US troops in Najaf in the Shi'a south of the country is unpopular and regarded as an authoritarian sect. But that is incidental to the central fact of mass support for the resistance; on April 9, after four days of fighting in Falluja, 200,000 people demonstrated in central Baghdad to protest US actions and show solidarity with the resistance fighters.

The outcome of the Falluja battle was a military and political defeat for US forces. Once the scale of civilian casualties became known, it was impossible for the marines to press home their attack. The generals wanted to do so, but Washington insisted that the troops be pulled back. Falluja more than anything else raised the issue of

whether America can win the war.

Torture Unlimited

If Falluja was bad news for the White House, more was hard on its heels. The revelations of systematic torture in Abu Ghraib prison dealt American claims to moral superiority a fearful blow. The White House and Pentagon responded with a minutely choreographed public relations exercise, gradually releasing just some of the photos of prisoner mistreatment in their hands. Everybody has seen the photos of torture. Very few have seen the worst, which involve rape and violent beatings. Probably a number of US newspapers and TV stations have these photos; none are prepared to publish them.

Pentagon strategy in relation to these revelations is to basically to claim Abu Ghraib was an exception, that things are OK now, and to blame a few relatively junior soldiers for the failings - one of whom has already been court-martialled. The truth is very different, that at least some forms of torture were officially sanctioned in the wake of 9/11, and are part and parcel of the 'war against terrorism'. In addition to Iraq, the US maintains a torture centre at Bagram air base in Afghanistan, and of course in Guantanamo Bay. Torture is supervised by special forces and the CIA, and also involves "civilian contractors" - mercenaries. In the wake of the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, torture was justified on the basis of the need to get "vital information" about al-Qaida. Although widely publicised as "torture lite", it has led to several deaths amongst prisoners, both in Afghanistan and Iraq - and these are just the ones that are known. But torture is not, and has never been anywhere, primarily about getting information. It is about humiliating and psychologically crushing the enemy, and spreading fear and demoralisation into the civilian population and political opponents. The inhuman and degrading conditions in Guantanamo Bay, for example, are nothing to do with gaining information. There is no more useful information to be gained. Torture, indefinite imprisonment and the upcoming military tribunals are all about demonstrating to opponents what they can expect if they take up arms against America. It remains to be seen what sentences are handed out by these tribunals, but the execution chamber has already been built.

These issues have proved embarrassing for the British government in particular, which has struggled hard to conceal Iraqi deaths in custody at the hands of British troops, and has been forced to publicly distance itself from the lack of due legal process in Guantanamo.

Same Donkey, Different Saddle

Does the US have an exit strategy from Iraq? In a certain sense, it doesn't want an exit strategy because it does not intend to exit. White House planning for Iraq envisages the retention of 14 huge military bases, which will become the centre of military operations in the Middle East. In addition the US will remain at the centre of the Iraqi economy for an indefinite time, richly rewarding US corporations with "reconstruction" contracts, paid for by Iraqi oil. There is absolutely no prospect of the United States giving up effective control of the world's second largest supplies of oil. In these circumstances an "exit" strategy means simply the installation of an "Iraqi" government, the pacification of the country through military force, the handing over of day-to-day security operations to the Iraqi police and army and the possibility of elections, with of course "extremists" excluded and a pro-American government "elected".

The centre-piece of this strategy is the "hand-over of sovereignty", achieved on June 28th. This was a most peculiar event, formalised by a ceremony hidden away inside the Green Zone, the heavily-armed cantonment from which the US operates in Baghdad. No bands, no cheering masses, no popular political figure to rally the nation.

Everyone knows that the government has been hand-picked by the White House, that the new prime minister is a CIA agent, that it has almost no popular support, and has nothing like “sovereignty”. As Haifa Sangana put it, “In Iraq, we have an expression: same donkey, different saddle. Iraq’s long-heralded interim government has now formally assumed sovereignty. Official labels and tags have duly changed. The US administrator will now be an ambassador, while Sheikh Ghazi al Yawar and Iyad Allawi, US-appointed members of the former governing council, are to be known as president and prime minister.”

But of course this is just show. “Prime minister” Iyad Allawi is a particularly unsavoury character, having been a loyal lieutenant of Saddam Hussein and an operative in his secret police, before falling out with Saddam, going into exile in the UK. Once in Britain he offered his services to MI6, and then to the CIA.

Every theorist of sovereignty, from Hobbes and Locke to the more cynical Conrad Schmitt, [1] have stressed that those who are sovereign have a monopoly of the legitimate use of military power. To emphasise the situation the Bush White House would not even agree to the British suggestion that the new interim government would have to be consulted about major military initiatives. The interim “government” controls neither decisive military forces, nor vital decisions over the economy. US deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz realistically says that with the “hand-over” of power, the violence is set to get worse.

Another irony of the “hand over of power” is the situation of 5,000 detainees, held by American forces. Both Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have declared that this detention is now illegal, and that detainees must be released or charged by the Iraqi government. Naturally there is no chance of their release. The interim government doesn’t even control its own jails.

The real question that faces the US, and its hope to move towards control of the country without daily war, is whether the insurgency can be defeated. That of course is a political and not primarily a military question. An opinion poll in June showed, unsurprisingly, a big majority of the Iraqis want the US out, and a clear majority who say they would be safer if the allied forces left. Thus the Bush administration is in a cleft stick, a vicious circle which is unsolvable. Since the US and its Iraqi allies have no popular legitimacy, the guerrilla war will continue, extracting a huge toll in deaths, injuries and all-round misery for the population. Naomi Klein [2] has shown how Bush’s administration has failed utterly to make major steps in rebuilding the country and is appropriating reconstruction money for “security” and even building a huge new US embassy. And the appointment of John Negroponte, former US ambassador in Honduras and one of the chief architects of the Nicaraguan “contra” rebels who fought to bring down the Sandinista government, does not exactly signal an emphasis on reconstruction on building a viable civil society. It suggests an emphasis on war.

The seemingly endless character of the US commitment, with troops levels increased this year by 30,000, the spending of some \$150 billion in Iraq so far and not least the endless stream of US casualties, threatens Bush with electoral defeat and poses major problems for the “defence intellectuals”, the neoconservative theorists who have championed the US’s increased reliance on military power.

Challenges for the Empire

America’s leading theorist of “offensive realism”, the academic John Mearsheimer, [3] famously and very controversially insists on the crucial role of ground forces in inflicting defeats on enemies, and minimises the role of air and sea power in winning military dominance. Critics of Mearsheimer point to the role air power played in defeating Japan in the Second World War. Whoever is right about this strategic debate, it is obvious that securing military control over a populated territory means having troops there. Lots of them. And this is where the difficulty for

the Bush administration arises. Troops on the ground get into battles and get killed, even with the vastly superior firepower that US troops deploy against any other military forces in the world, regular or irregular. They are particularly vulnerable to urban guerrilla warfare. High tech weaponry comes into its own in conventional war, it has limitations in nuclear war (because no known technology can prevent some enemy missiles getting through - so far at least), and is largely neutralised in urban guerrilla war. Powerful night-sights for snipers may be useful for shooting down unsuspecting civilians in Falluja (dozens of civilians were killed this way), but they cannot guard against roadside bombs, and low tech weapons like Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades. This is the irony of Iraq. Weapons that routed Saddam Hussein's (appallingly led) army twice are useless in defeating urban guerrillas with mass support.

There is just one variable here which determines everything - the old question of whether the "Vietnam syndrome" (the refusal of the US public to accept military casualties) has been overcome. After two Iraq wars, brilliant military triumphs at minimal cost, the neocons imagined it has. In reality the jury is still out, but the signs are not so good. Several things show that the Bush administration is still fearful on this front; its decision to ban any filming or photos of military funerals, its attempt to suppress photos of coffins being brought back to America, and its attempts to minimise the real size of US casualties.

So far the US losses are small. The public figure is about 800 dead, maybe the real figure is nearer 1,000. Compare that with 16,000 dead in Vietnam in 1967/8 alone. There is no comparison. Despite that, already opinion polls show a small majority against Bush's handling of Iraq. It is an open question how many casualties American public opinion can withstand.

What is clear however is that the resistance in Iraq has placed a massive obstacle in the way of further military adventures. In June 2004 the idea, seriously discussed a year ago by supporters and opponents of Bush alike, would go on to Iran or Syria or North Korea (never a serious prospect given the latter's nuclear weapons), is now totally off the agenda. Today there are 140,000 troops in Iraq, 20,000 in Afghanistan, another 5600 who are going to Iraq soon, and tens of thousands of first echelon reservists who have been put on notice they might be called up in the next year. Add to that the \$150 billion dollars spent in the last year, then the idea of further near-future military adventures is out of the question. Indeed, the removal of ultra-hawk Richard Perle from his part-time post in the Defence Advisory Board was a sure sign that the administration wants some restraint from neocons in the government's ambit.

Regional Disaster for US

Probably there were few in the administration (outside the Pentagon) who seriously contemplated going beyond Iraq. However the administration did see removing Saddam and imposing its own government as a step towards the fundamental transformation of the Middle East, to bring about a more peaceful, orderly and pro-American region. In the thinking of State Department this involved trying to use American leverage to bring about a resolution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. But this would have meant pressurising the Israelis to make concessions on territory. However, the opposite has happened. Bush instead has backed up Ariel Sharon 100%. This combined with the Iraq guerrilla war has created a new dynamic in the region. As David Hirst puts it:

"For years it had been all but axiomatic that any western intervention to bring down Saddam needed to be matched by an essentially pro-Palestinian policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict too. The West had created Israel at the Palestinians' expense, and any realistic settlement had so far as possible to redress that historic injustice.

"Otherwise, all the war's official objectives would be dismissed out of court as just another blatant episode in the

history of western conquest and exploitation.

“The neo-cons bought the axiom - but turned it on its head. Thanks to them the invasion of Iraq was really the supreme expression of US double standards in the region. In theory, the settlement was to come about through region-wide democratisation and other blessings of America's “civilising mission”.

“In practice, it would come about through a far higher level of external coercion than ever applied before, and by a yet more extravagant bias in Israel's favour. Even now, as he slips further into the Iraqi quagmire, George Bush has put America openly behind prime minister Ariel Sharon's expansionist designs.

“So while the Palestinians have their own, American-created reasons for stepped-up resistance, they naturally view that of the Iraqis as an integral part of the same anti-imperialist struggle.

“More tellingly - and despite their widespread disillusionment with pan-Arabism, a Saddam legacy, from which the neo-cons had hoped to profit - the Iraqis have adopted Palestine as part of their own. Now, in Falluja, Sunni Islamists do battle in the name of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin; in Najaf, the rebellious Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr calls himself the “striking Iraqi arm of Hizbullah and Hamas”.....

“Lebanon's Hizbullah is strictly local in origin and membership, but it enjoys greater region-wide prestige than al-Qaida, because it confined itself to fighting - and besting - Israel in a classical guerrilla war which few but Israelis and America classified as terrorist. It now regards Iraqi resistance as accessory to its own. Increasingly accused by the Israelis of aiding and abetting Palestinian Islamists, and of accumulating a vast new firepower, it is ready and waiting for a cross-border conflagration; but it wants Israel to start it, so that its re-entry into the jihadist arena is legitimate as well as spectacular.” (“Guardian” 4/6/04).

All this adds up to a regional disaster for the United States. A huge amount of fuel is being stored up for further explosions and conflicts. For millions of Arabs, the role of the United States as the enemy has been vividly reinforced.

One force that has not stood in the way of US aims is of course the European governments who opposed the attack on Iraq, particularly the government of Chirac in France and Schröder in Germany. They were party to the shameful Security Council resolution, which gives UN legitimacy to the continued occupation and fraudulent new “government” - while at the same time banning the import of arms into Iraq “except to coalition forces”.

The huge forces that made up the European anti-war movement will make no such capitulation. They must continue to demand the removal of Western troops from Iraq, as the first step - along with the removal of Israeli troops from Palestinian territory - towards real peace and freedom in the Middle East.

[1] Schmitt was the Nazi “jurisprudence” expert. According to him “he who is sovereign is he who has the right to declare a state of exception” -ie possesses the power to dismiss any other pretenders to government, which at least implies control of the armed forces.

[2] Naomi Klein: “Shameless in Iraq” (25/6/04). www.nologo.org

[3] John J. Mearsheimer: “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”, WW Norton, 2001.