

Into the Long War

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Introduction

In October 2002, Oxford Research Group published an analysis of the possible effects of a US attack on the Saddam Hussein regime – *Iraq: Consequences of a War*.¹ The report pointed to the likely impact of an occupation of Iraq on regional antagonism to the United States extending even to increased support for the al-Qaida movement and also pointed to the risk of a developing insurgency.

Oxford Research Group was far from being alone in expressing these concerns, but the war went ahead and the Saddam Hussein regime was terminated in barely three weeks. Within a further few weeks there were already clear signs of developing instability in Iraq, demonstrated in two different ways. One was the immediate deterioration in public order, with the onset of widespread looting that could not be contained by the coalition troops that had replaced the old regime. The other was the outbreak of attacks on the coalition troops themselves, especially US forces in Baghdad and Central Iraq. Even as President Bush was making his famous ‘mission accomplished’ speech on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln*, on 1 May 2003, American, British and other coalition forces were already involved in counter-insurgency operations.

It therefore looked as though the Iraq War was still in its early stages, rather than being a brief conflict, and Afghanistan, too, was experiencing a degree of violence and disorder that suggested that here was another zone of conflict that might not make the transition to peace and security that had been

so confidently expected in 2002. In these circumstances, Oxford Research Group commenced a series of International Security Monthly Briefings in May 2003, that were intended to analyse the major developments in the 'war on terror', while endeavouring to put these developments in a long-term context.

The core of the present volume comprises those briefings produced from May 2005 to April 2006, and is the third such volume. It analyses what was essentially the third year of the current Iraq War, while also discussing the evolving conflict in Afghanistan, increasing tensions with Iran, incidents of paramilitary violence related to the al-Qaida movement, and developments in US, British and coalition military postures. The briefings are reproduced here with a minimum of editing, this being confined to minor matters of grammatical improvement or the avoidance of repetition. They are placed in context in the first chapter with a review of developments from September 2001 through to April 2005, and there is an extensive final chapter that places the year from May 2005 to April 2006 in a longer-term context. In particular, this focuses on the transition from a terminology of a 'war on terror' to a 'long war', with the latter suggesting that the post-9/11 global security environment is likely to take the form of an enduring conflict stretching well beyond a decade.

In February 1993, President Clinton's new appointee as Director of Central Intelligence, James Woolsey, had characterised the transition to the post-Cold War world as being one in which the United States had slain the dragon but now lived in a jungle full of poisonous snakes. Thirteen years later, and five years after the 9/11 attacks, the taming of that jungle is seen as the main task of the US military for the foreseeable future. The first year of the Iraq War was one in which liberation turned to occupation and then to insurgency, and the second year saw the consolidation of that insurgency coupled with renewed insecurity in Afghanistan. The third

year has seen the development of an attitude within the United States that sees a long-term conflict ahead even though this has coincided with a marked decrease in political support for the war in Iraq. If a 'long war' does ensue, then the period covered by this report will mark that further transition, with implications that may be felt for some decades.

A Note on Sources

Oxford Research Group's monthly international security briefings are written using a wide range of sources and, in this volume, a number of the more specific of these are given in the endnotes. The briefings have tended to involve a degree of critical analysis that is in marked contrast to the outlooks and expectations persistently expressed by the Bush and Blair administrations, and they have tended to be substantially more accurate in their prognosis over the past three years. It might therefore be useful to indicate some of the sources used.

In what might be termed the mainstream media, US, UK and French broadsheets are accessed, commonly on a daily basis, with the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian* and *Le Monde* being particularly useful. Newspapers in Israel, Pakistan and India are also useful as are broadcast news media websites for the BBC, Al-Jazeera, CNN and others. Elements of the defence press are valuable sources, with *Jane's Defence Weekly*, *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, *Jane's International Defence Review* and *Defence News* being particularly useful. The British Aid to Afghanistan Group's monthly assessment is invariably pertinent as are the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's *Iraq Crisis Reports*.

Some individual websites are of consistent help, especially Juan Cole's *Informed Comment*, and William J. Arkin's site at the *Washington Post*. Some of the *Strategic Comments* from

the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London have proved both useful and prescient, and Anthony Cordesman's reports published by the Center for International and Strategic Studies in Washington are always worth studying. These are some of the most helpful examples of sources, to which may be added many blogs, especially those originating in Iraq, whether from Iraqis, from coalition troops or others.

Beyond this, though, have been that wide range of individuals, including many senior military officers, who have been willing to discuss the issues covered here, often informally and on the occasion of conferences, seminars or lectures. In the year covered by this book, they have included sessions at Chatham House, the Royal United Services Institute, the Joint Service Command and Staff College, the Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre, the Institute for Regional Studies in Islamabad, the Institute for Political and International Studies in Tehran and the UN University for Peace in Costa Rica. In addition, Oxford Research Group's own staff and wide range of contacts have proved invaluable.

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1

The Context for a Long War

Following the election of President George W. Bush in November 2000, United States foreign and security policy was heavily influenced by the neo-conservative outlook and the belief that the United States had a unique role in evolving an international economic and political system that was effectively in the American image. A combination of free market economics and western-style democratic governance was seen as the only way forward now that the Soviet Union was long gone and even China was embracing major elements of the market economy. While this idea of a New American Century was never accepted across the whole American political spectrum it was particularly prominent in neo-conservative thinking and the early months of the Bush administration saw much of this outlook reflected in policy changes.

These included opposition to a number of multilateral agreements, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and a markedly critical approach to negotiations on the International Criminal Court and the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. Perhaps of most surprise to some European allies was the decision to withdraw from the Kyoto Climate Change Protocols, but this should not have been so unexpected given the firm belief of the new administration that the United States should not be constrained by international

agreements that were not clearly in its own interest, whatever the global context.

As Charles Krauthammer put it in June 2001:

Multipolarity, yes, when there is no alternative. But not when there is. Not when we have the unique imbalance of power that we enjoy today – and that has given the international system a stability and essential tranquillity it had not known for at least a century.

The international environment is far more likely to enjoy peace under a single hegemon. Moreover, we are not just any hegemon. We run a uniquely benign imperium.¹

Responding to the 9/11 Attacks

By September 2001, this approach was firmly established within US security thinking in the Bush administration and there was considerable confidence that the United States had the military and economic power coupled with political influence to ensure that it remained the world leader in the new century. In such a context the 9/11 atrocities came as a severe shock and the reaction was immediate and forceful. Within three months the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had been terminated by military action, on the grounds that the regime harboured key leadership elements of the al-Qaida movement that was held responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

The termination of the Taliban was achieved not by the use of substantial US ground forces but by a combination of the extensive use of air power, the employment of Special Forces and, most notably, by the rapid re-arming and support of the Northern Alliance. In taking this latter path, the United States effectively altered the balance of power in the ongoing Afghan civil war, ensuring the rapid demise of the Taliban, even though most elements melted away, often with weapons intact. That the Taliban did not suffer a comprehensive and irreversible military defeat was not recognised at the time, even if there was severe fighting in the Tora Bora mountain region within months of the fall of Kabul.

In the early part of 2002 there were urgent calls from UN and other specialists for substantial aid for Afghanistan, not just in terms of extensive development assistance but also through the provision of large numbers of peace-keeping troops to play a stabilising role. Expert assessments pointed to the need for up to 30,000 military and police personnel, but barely 5,000 were provided to form the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In a separate operation, the United States established two major military bases in Afghanistan – at Bagram, north of Kabul, and at Kandahar. While the initial intention was to constitute these as permanent bases with relatively small numbers of troops, by the latter part of 2002 insurgent activity was developing to the extent that the United States was committing many thousands of combat troops to face a developing if initially small-scale insurgency.

Meanwhile, and following the regime termination in Afghanistan, President Bush's State of Union address in January 2002 extended the war on terror to encompass an 'axis of evil' of regimes that supported terrorism and were also intent on developing weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. Iraq, Iran and North Korea were named as primary members of this axis of evil. Mr Bush subsequently made it clear that the United States had the right to pre-empt threats from states or sub-state actors before such threats against the United States were realised. During the early months of 2002, Iraq was singled out as being the most immediate threat to US security interests in the Middle East, with suggestions that the Saddam Hussein regime's support for terrorist movements might even mean there was an indirect threat from Iraq to the continental United States.

During the course of the latter part of 2002, a coalition of supporting states was assembled for the purpose of regime termination in Iraq. The eventual group of states was smaller than the coalition assembled in 1990–91 after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, even though a degree of approval was

sought from the United Nations. The United States provided the great majority of troops, aircraft and ships, although Britain was also significant when compared with other states such as Australia and Italy that sent modest contingents.

The military operation to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime began in March 2003, with the regime falling within three weeks. The expectation was that US and other coalition troops would be welcomed as liberators across much of Iraq, a friendly government would be established in Baghdad, would develop a free market economy and would look to the United States for security. Within three weeks of the end of the Saddam Hussein regime there were reports that the United States would establish four permanent military sites in Iraq, with perhaps 20,000 personnel based there. In the short term, though, it was expected that the 150,000 troops involved in the initial occupation would be scaled down to 70,000 within six months. It is worth noting, though, that some assessments by analysts in the United States and elsewhere believed that there was a prospect of an insurgency and that several hundred thousand troops might be required to ensure security.

The Iraq War – Year One

The initial success in terminating the Saddam Hussein regime disguised a number of problems and issues that were present from the very start of the war, even before President Bush declared military operations successful in his USS *Abraham Lincoln* speech on 1 May 2003. There had originally been considerable confidence that the ‘shock and awe’ of a major air assault would make it relatively easy for highly mobile ground troops to move rapidly forward to Baghdad, even though Turkey had refused to allow US troops to enter from the north. There was even a belief in some quarters that the Saddam Hussein regime would collapse in the face of the initial air assault.

From the very start of the war, though, there was an unexpected level of resistance, not so much from regular troops in armoured formations in open country but from irregular or paramilitary units operating mainly in urban environments. It took several days to take control of the small but strategically significant port of Umm Qasr, close to the Kuwait border, and as US troops began to move towards Baghdad they found a constant problem of attacks on supply lines by irregular forces. Furthermore, the first incidents of suicide bombings against US troops occurred within two weeks of the start of the war.²

In spite of these problems, the main US force progressed towards Baghdad rapidly and was able to use a combination of intensive air power and ground artillery to damage hugely the regular Republican Guard formations that formed a defensive shield to the south of Baghdad. There had been an expectation that the city itself would be heavily defended, possibly by the elite Special Republican Guard, together with *fedayeen* and commando units and the troop formations attached to the regime's various security and intelligence agencies. In practice, the defences were minimal apart from some intensive conflict close to the international airport, and the regime fell quickly. The deceptive part of this rapid process, though, was that an absence of resistance by elite units did not equate with their defeat.

Two other issues were relevant in the first month of the war. One was that there was a minimum of rejoicing by Iraqis at the fall of the old regime, except in the Kurdish North East. While a positive reaction had not been expected in many of the Sunni population areas of central Iraq, there had been an expectation of welcome in the Shi'a population centres in southern Iraq and in parts of Baghdad. This simply did not happen. Possible explanations at the time included the memory of the failure of the United States to support the Shi'a uprising after the first Iraq War in 1991, together with the possible continued presence of influential regime elements in the towns

and cities of the south. Even allowing for these factors, the lack of immediate support for the occupying powers was a major surprise, with the prowess of the United States military also badly affected by its inability to control the comprehensive breakdown of law and order and especially the widespread looting that developed within days of the regime's demise.

Within three months of the end of the old regime, it was apparent that armed resistance to the coalition presence was beginning in earnest. In July 2003 alone, the US forces lost 48 troops killed and several hundred wounded and in the year from 1 May 2003, the day in which Bush had declared victory, US forces were to lose 601 people killed and some 3,000 seriously wounded.

Three of the early factors aiding the developing insurgency became apparent. One was that many Iraqis, especially among Sunni communities, were resentful of what was seen from the start not as liberation but as foreign occupation, an aspect made worse by the immediate decline in living standards in the face of a wide range of shortages. A second was that many of the elite forces that were loyal to the old regime had survived the first few weeks of the war almost unscathed, having largely melted away rather than face US forces with their massive advantages in firepower. These elements recognised that many of the senior figures in the Saddam Hussein regime were killed or detained in the early weeks of the occupation, but Saddam Hussein and his two sons survived. Aiding the developing insurgency was the third factor – the dispersal and ready availability of large quantities of arms and munitions.

During the course of the period May 2003 to June 2004, Iraq was run by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under the leadership of Paul Bremer. The CPA moved rapidly to encourage a market economy but failed to prevent considerable damage to the physical infrastructure of the country, either from looters or insurgents. The oil industry and electricity production and distribution were badly affected, even in the

first year, but two other matters added to the CPA's problems. One was an intensive programme of 'de-Ba'athification', as elements in public service that had been connected to the former Ba'ath Party were removed from office. Since many of them were technocrats with little more than the nominal party membership necessary for survival under the old regime, the effect was to deprive the country of substantial elements of the human resources necessary for reconstruction and development.

The second CPA error was the remarkable decision to disband the old Iraqi Army. Even though many of the 400,000 personnel had deserted or been stood down by their officers in the early weeks of the conflict, their dismissal meant that large numbers of soldiers were thrust into unemployment, producing an embittered cohort from which insurgents could gain further recruits.

By August 2003, a series of attacks, including the bombing of the UN offices in Baghdad, demonstrated the power of the insurgency. Even so, there appeared to be an enduring belief in the CPA and among the US military that the attacks were due simply to discontented 'remnants' of the old regime and would fade away rapidly. These could be seen as terrorists, with Iraq now being seen as a key focus for the wider war on terror.

The deaths of Qusay and Uday Hussein in Mosul in July 2003 and the subsequent detention of Saddam Hussein himself five months later were both expected to blunt the insurgency, but neither incident had any discernible effect. Moreover, it was apparent by early 2004 that insurgents had consolidated control of some towns and cities in central Iraq. During April 2004, much of the focus was on Fallujah where attempts to secure the city following the killing of four American contractors resulted in intensive violence, with US forces trying to take control in the face of considerable resistance and high casualties. In that month alone, the US forces had 135 of its troops killed.

The Iraq War – Year Two

As the war entered its second year, there continued to be optimism within the Bush administration that the insurgency would wind down. Much was made of the entry into Iraq of some jihadist paramilitaries from other countries across the region, with this being seen as proof that Iraq was becoming a prime theatre in the war on terror. In practice, the numbers were small – never more than one tenth of the total, but in some circles in Washington, Iraq was seen as a magnet for al-Qaida paramilitaries. It was, according to this view, hugely preferable that such terrorists would face up to overwhelming US military force under circumstances dictated by the Pentagon rather than concentrate on engaging in attacks on the United States or US interests abroad.

At the same time, during the course of the period May 2004 to April 2005, there were few signs of any improvement in the security situation in Afghanistan, and the al-Qaida movement remained active across the world, with attacks in Djakarta and Sinai. Moreover, US forces suffered continuing casualties in Iraq, including 851 people killed and almost 9,500 wounded. Of the latter, more than half were sufficiently wounded to be unable to return to duty within 72 hours, with many of these evacuated from Iraq to the Landstuhl military hospital in Germany and then onwards to the United States. In addition, many thousands of military personnel were evacuated back to the United States for treatment for non-combat injuries or mental or physical illness.

During this period, the impact of injuries became one of the defining if largely unrecognised features of the war. In most forms of modern conventional war, the ratio of injuries to deaths tends to be of the order of 3:1, whereas for the US military in Iraq it has tended to be around double that. There are two main reasons for this. One is that very high standards of battlefield medicine, especially the rapid stabilisation of

casualties, means that far more people survive injuries that in other circumstances would kill them. The second is that the development and use of anti-ballistic body armour has meant that fatal injuries are less frequent. The effect of these two factors is to produce a situation in which many military personnel survive with serious injuries to the groin, face, head and throat and suffer limb injuries that frequently require amputation. This trend has had two impacts in terms of attitudes to the war, one in the United States and the other with the US military deployed in Iraq.

Regarding the domestic impact, the context is that the Bush administration has been reluctant to see its senior personnel connected with the issue of casualties. It has been rare for leading political figures to visit casualties in the military hospitals in the Washington area and little publicity has been given to the return home for burial of the soldiers killed in the war. Against this, though, the stream of funerals or the return to the towns and city districts across the United States of seriously injured young soldiers has had a slow but steady impact. There may be little national coverage, but local media outlets have reported on individual cases, with this in turn leading to a questioning of policy.

In relation to military attitudes in Iraq, the deaths and serious injuries suffered by US military personnel engaged in fighting an increasingly bitter urban insurgency resulted in an increasingly aggressive series of responses. The tendency has been to use the immense firepower advantage at any early stage in any insurgency attack on troops. Thus an individual sniper attack might stimulate a response involving many hundreds of rounds of ammunition or even the calling in of helicopter gun-ships or strike aircraft. Inevitably, a result has been high levels of civilian casualties among ordinary people caught up in the conflict, with deaths among civilians being at least ten times as high as those among the US military, a consequence being further antagonism to occupation.

If the issue of deaths and injuries to US troops was increasingly significant during the second year of the Iraq War, several other factors became more relevant. One was the level of Iraqi civilian casualties, which reached some 25,000 killed and tens of thousands of injured in the first two years. These estimates stem from external analysis, particularly the Iraq Body Count group, that draws its data primarily from multiple media sources.³ Using an exacting media-based methodology gives reliable baseline figures but is also likely to underestimate total casualties due to under-reporting in the media. Consequently the figure of 25,000 casualties may actually be a marked underestimate of the true figure.

A second factor was the continued failure of the Iraq Survey Group to uncover any substantive evidence of the Saddam Hussein regime's retaining an active programme to develop nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Indeed this was such a clear-cut outcome that the issue of weapons of mass destruction receded into the background as a reason for the war. This may have been one reason for the increased opposition to the war, especially in Western Europe, but it also serves to explain why the Bush administration was more insistent on linking the Iraq War with the wider al-Qaida movement. By doing this, a strong connection could be maintained between the difficult military task for US forces in Iraq and the original 9/11 attacks. Controlling the insurgency could be presented as a major response to 9/11.

Within Iraq, direct military support for the US forces from coalition partners eased substantially during 2004–05. Poland, Ukraine, and especially Britain maintained substantial troop numbers, but many small contingents were either withdrawn or were not replaced at the time of the rotation of units, and some significant contributors to the coalition such as Spain withdrew all their troops.

Against this, one relationship developed further: the military connection between the United States and Israel. This was