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IRAN – SLIDING TO WAR?

Paul Rogers

Afghanistan

During March there were increasing security problems in Afghanistan with the possibility of a Taliban “spring offensive” growing (see January briefing, *Iraq, Afghanistan and now Iran Once Again*). Activities by Taliban and other militias increased, with a number of attacks on the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and US forces, but the much greater problem was the series of near-daily attacks on Afghan security forces and government officials. These included eleven major incidents during the course of the month, most commonly aimed at police, security and intelligence personnel, but a particular feature was the pattern of assassination attempts on senior figures.

On 12 March, two suicide bombers attacked the vehicle carrying Sibghatullah Mujadidi, the Leader of the Upper House of Parliament, killing two civilians and injuring Mr Mujadidi. The attack may have had a particular significance as he was head of a government commission that was attempting to negotiate with Taliban elements with a view to seeking reconciliation. On 18 March, assassination attempts were made on the governor of Ghazni Province and the previous governor. The current governor survived but his predecessor, Qari Baba, was killed along with four other people. Four days later the governor of the province of Faryab survived an attack.

March also saw a number of attacks on aid organisations and private security personnel, as well as a deterioration in the security situation along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border as tensions between the two countries increased. Afghan officials claimed that Pakistani security forces were not doing enough to provide security in the frontier districts, but the Pakistan government responded by pointing to 82,000 Army troops deployed along the border.

Independent analyses point to the failure of the Pakistani Army to control the region, especially the districts of North and South Waziristan. Over the past three years there have been attempts by the authorities to deal with local elders, encouraging them to give up radical elements. By and large, these have failed, and there have been two unfortunate consequences from Pakistan’s point of view. One is that there has been an increased anti-government mood, made worse by the effects of US unmanned aerial drones targeting presumed Taliban groups but often killing civilians. President Musharraf is regarded as being far too close to the United States, and the result of US actions such as these within the country is to heighten the mood of antagonism.

The second consequence has been that the independent power base of the elders in the frontier districts has been weakened by what is seen as the more direct interference by government. The previous pattern was for them to exercise considerable power and influence but they are now being replaced by a new generation of younger men, often closely allied to militias that connect with Taliban groups. Up until about three years ago, the Pakistani government tacitly allowed elders in the frontier region effective control, but that has now partially ended, eroding the power of the elders in favour of this new generation.

The end result of this is that the frontier region is simply not under the control of the Pakistani Army, whatever may be claimed by Islamabad. A full-scale spring offensive in Afghanistan by Taliban and other militias has not yet developed, but there has certainly been a marked deterioration in security across substantial parts of the country, together with a weakening of the authority of Musharraf’s regime in Pakistan.

Iraq

At the time of the elections four months ago, there was a concerted effort by the Bush administration to put forward the view that Iraq was moving towards a more peaceful era. This has simply been eroded by the substantial rise in sectarian violence in addition to the existing insurgency and rampant criminality. During the course of March there was much controversy over whether the security situation in Iraq had degenerated into a civil war. Whatever definition one uses of a civil war, such terminology is singularly unhelpful in that it does not matter hugely in analysing the recent developments.

What is clear is that there has been a general deterioration in the levels of security in much of the country. A US government assessment at the end of March was that the situation in six of Iraq's 18 provinces was serious and, in one case, was critical. As the provinces included the largest population centre, Baghdad, and another major centre, Basra, the assessment was that about half of the entire population was living in these insecure areas. This compared with four provinces said to be heavily affected by the insurgency just a year ago. Moreover, the new assessment also downgraded the security situation in Basra, a city that had previously been relatively calm.

Four issues stand out. One is that March did see a decrease in US combat deaths, although the level of combat injuries was as high as ever. Given that the United States is conducting fewer ground patrols and is relying more on air power, it is not surprising that combat deaths have decreased. This trend may be used in Washington as a sign of improvement, but two further factors discount this. One is that attacks on Iraqi security forces have been particularly severe, and another is that the number of kidnappings and sectarian murders has increased substantially in recent months, including around fifty inter-communal killings every day.

The fourth issue has been the rise to greater prominence of Shi'a militia, especially the Mehdi Army that has allegiance to Moqtada al-Sadr. This group and other militias have some links with Iran, especially the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and US military and political sources have made much of Iran's involvement in the insurgency. In fact, there is little evidence of any substantive involvement, but that does not disguise the fact that Iranian interests could greatly aid insurgent actions against the United States if they chose to do so.

Whatever happens in the coming months in Iraq, there are no indications whatsoever of a wholesale United States withdrawal from the country. There may well be a draw down of a few thousand troops in the run up to the November Congressional elections, but this relates to US domestic politics. What is more revealing is a series of reports that the United States is investing heavily in building programmes that allow for long-term basing of US troops at a number of key sites in Iraq. In this respect there has been no change in policy. What is still sought is a stable pro-American client government in power in Baghdad, with the United States maintaining perhaps 20,000 troops in the country and acting as a final guarantor of Iraqi government stability. In the current circumstances such an aim is implausible in the extreme, but there are no indications of any alternative policies coming out of Washington even if the war is now into its fourth year.

Iran

In the January briefing in this series, it was suggested that the potential for conflict over Iran's nuclear ambitions would become progressively more prominent during the course of 2006. Two months later, this has proved to be the case, and it is worth standing back to get a detached view of the recent developments. A starting point remains the Oxford Research Group report, *Iran: Consequences of a War* (February 2006), that concluded that any US military action against Iranian nuclear facilities would be likely to lead to a complex set of Iranian responses. These could lead to major difficulties for the United States and its coalition partners in the region, coupled with the risk of a very considerable impact on world oil prices. Although many analysts and some politicians share this view, it has had little or no

impact in Washington where there are a number of indications that serious planning for military action is now under way.

Given the risks that would result from American action against Iranian nuclear facilities, it is relevant to ask why Iran causes such concern in Washington. Part of the explanation does go back to the fall of the Shah. Not only was this a severe shock to the United States since the Shah's Iran had been its key client state in the region and a perceived bulwark against the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, but the manner of the revolution was an added shock. It happened with a rapidity that caught almost every part of the American government by surprise, and was made much worse by the holding of US diplomats hostage in Tehran for more than a year.

While this memory is deep-seated, especially in the State Department, it is only a partial explanation. Three other factors have to be taken into account. One is the central importance of the security of Israel to successive American administrations. Jewish support for Israel within the United States may have weakened in recent years especially as many liberal Jews became increasingly critical of the policies of the Sharon government, but this has been counterbalanced by the increased political power of the Christian Zionists and the pro-Israel neo-conservatives.

The Christian Zionists may not exhibit the political sophistication of the traditional Israel lobby but they have become an important adjunct to it, representing a sector of the electorate numbering in the tens of millions that tends to vote Republican in Congressional and Presidential elections. Israel regards Iran as its only major threat in the entire region, and has done so more or less continually since the fall of the Shah 27 years ago. It follows that US domestic support for Israel shares this view, and prominent pro-Israeli politicians in the United States are particularly strong in their rhetoric against Iran.

Iran has also become a greater problem for the United States because of the failures in Iraq. The original intention in terminating the Saddam Hussein regime was not just to get a stable client state operating pro-American free-market principles, but to do so right next to Iran and to be able to maintain permanent bases there. "The road to Tehran goes through Baghdad" was a common saying in Washington in 2002, and the confident expectation was that US prowess in Iraq would have a profound impact in Tehran. If the United States was willing and able to terminate regimes to the east and west of Iran, and to use the Fifth Fleet to control the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, then any regime in Tehran would be exceedingly cautious about developing foreign and security policies that were in any way opposed to US interests.

With the failure to achieve its objectives in Iraq, the United States has not only lost this opportunity to influence Iran, but has actually handed Tehran a substantial political gift. Iran is now free to develop close links with Iraq's Shi'a majority and can even set up a series of relationships with some of the insurgent groups. It is now less a case of the United States being able to put indirect pressure on Iran, more the other way round. This is, to put it bluntly, unacceptable to Washington.

Finally, the US relationship with Iran remains deeply connected to oil security across the region. With the United States and China increasingly reliant on Gulf oil, and with the rest of the industrialised world similarly dependent, the Persian Gulf is just too important for Washington to allow an independent "rogue state" to enhance its power base. As a result, the view from within the Bush administration is that there are no circumstances under which Iran can be allowed to become a nuclear weapons power. Not only is this unacceptable, but Iran cannot even be allowed to have the theoretical capability to develop nuclear weapons. It follows that the development of a full nuclear fuel cycle, even if the ostensible motive is to support a civil nuclear power programme, cannot be allowed.

The Tehran Perspective

From within Iran, the thirst for technological modernity is such that just such a civil nuclear power programme is seen as an absolute right for a country of 75 million people and a 3,000-year history that intends to embrace the 21st century. Given the regime's theocratic nature this may seem a surprise, but that view fails to understand the nature of the theocracy. In Iranian religious thinking, what may appear to some other cultures to be a near-medieval return to religious rigidity is seen as a purification process that is in no way in contradiction to the development of advanced technologies. Indeed, such progress will serve to enhance the potential for the further development of society – Islamist modernity is not seen as a contradiction in terms.

With this at the root of the political outlook there is the added perception of an evil opposing superpower that is absolutely determined to prevent Iran achieving its potential. This superpower has already characterised Iran as part of an “axis of evil” and a “rogue state” and is openly financing opposition groups that are seeking regime change. In such circumstances, military strength, including at least the theoretical capability to take the nuclear weapons route, is seen as a matter of routine political sense. That this is the case with a regime that is currently led by a man given to extreme statements regarding Israel means that there is a clear risk of a US/Iran confrontation.

Allies of the United States may be very keen to avoid such a confrontation, and considerable efforts may be made to use diplomatic pressure and even economic sanctions against Iran rather than a military confrontation. It is not clear, however, if the Iranians will respond to the former, given the rhetoric coming out of Washington, and sanctions have little prospect of being effective given the long-term oil and gas deals that Iran has recently concluded with China and India.

One positive indication is that some European governments do seem to appreciate the considerable dangers that would arise following any American military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. Iran's capacity for retaliation in Iraq, in western Gulf states and against oil exports from the Gulf is clearly recognised in a number of European capitals where it is believed that the consequences could be far greater than those now being experienced in Iraq. Whatever may be said in public, there are likely to be intensive private efforts by some European governments to restrain the Bush administration from any precipitate action, no matter how deep-seated are the administration's concerns over Iran.

At root, though, the tensions remain and will not easily be diminished. It is in these circumstances that it is necessary to be prepared for the unexpected. Given the mutual antagonism between Tehran and Washington, quite small incidents are easily capable of turning problems into crises. That may be the main danger in the coming months as wiser political counsels attempt to avert a full-scale confrontation.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm> and visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG if you are able to do so.

You may also be interested in “Iran: Consequences of a War” published by ORG in February 2006. Copies of the paper can be purchased from our online shop at www.orgshop.org.uk or downloaded from <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefings/IranConsequences.htm>.
