



Iraq: After the Surge

Monday 1 October 2007, 15:00-16:30
Middle East Programme Meeting
Chatham House, London

Speaker: Dr Joost Hiltermann, International Crisis Group
Chair: Dr Claire Spencer, Middle East Programme, Chatham House

Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to government or to any political body. It does not hold opinions of its own; the views expressed in this summary are the responsibility of the speaker. This summary is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the speaker and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the speech.

The meeting was held on the record.

Dr Hiltermann suggested that, by examining what happened both before and during the US surge in Iraq, it is possible to make some predictions about what will happen when the surge is ended. He suggested that the end of the surge is inevitable, especially given President Bush's imminent departure from office. Dr Hiltermann made reference to Roger Owen's recent work in *Herald Tribune* which looked at the internal contradictions of the surge. Dr Hiltermann argued that he would use an extended version of Professor Owen's concept of internal contradictions as a tool for his presentation during which he would consider American aims in Iraq, the current situation and possible consequences for the future.

Dr Hiltermann identified three key US objectives in Iraq: first, to establish democracy; second, to bring Iraq into an American alliance and gain its favour in the peace process; third, the US had hoped that its involvement in Iraq would have a democratic knock-on effect but in fact, the US was ending its legacy of support for autocratic regimes following the attacks of 9/11. Furthermore, Dr Hiltermann noted that there was a widespread feeling that the Iraqi elections of 2005 had given victory to parties that were close to Iran and had led to a feeling that Iraq had been given to the Iranians. This was strongly felt by the Gulf countries. It seemed that the US had bestowed two gifts upon Iran: first, by overthrowing Saddam; second, through the results of the 2005 election. Miscalculation in this respect meant that it was highly convenient for Iran that the US had become increasingly bogged down in Iraq, as 'sitting ducks' for Iranian attacks.

Dr Hiltermann turned to consider the internal contradictions of US aims in Iraq. Far from creating the knock-on democratization effect in the Arab world which the Bush

administration had hoped for, the Iraqi elections had heightened moderate Arab sensitivities regarding the influence of Islamist parties and the 2006 electoral victory of Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had added to this sentiment.

The US wanted to keep Iraq whole and had no intention of breaking it up, in part because the US needed Iraq to continue to be an important counterweight to Iran. However, at the same time, the US could only support those parties which existed in the Iraqi political arena and many of these have clear sectarian agendas. The result has been the establishment of a government consisting of parties which did not support Iraqi unity. Institutions and mechanisms were also based on these sentiments.

Dr Hiltermann stressed that chaos in Iraq was the result of the US failing to put enough troops on the ground: this had created a vacuum which had been filled by violent actors and militias due to the lack of viable alternatives. This had led, albeit by default, to the encouragement of warlordism.

The neo-conservatives had entered Iraq with concerns about weapons of mass destruction and the Bush administration held a personal grudge against Saddam dating back to his invasion of Kuwait. However, Dr Hiltermann suggested that it was important to consider that the real issue in 2003 had been Iran. The US sought to send an implicit warning to Iran through its invasion of Iraq but this message had not been transmitted as planned. Iran proceeded with its nuclear weapons programme and did not react as Libya and North Korea had done previously.

The surge was designed to create space to make political deals and to re-stabilise Iraq. It was also hoped that this process would enhance a sense of national unity. However, contrary to US objectives, a number of deals made at the local level led to increased fragmentation, not national unity. Tribal and clan leaders began a vigorous fight for the control of national resources.

Dr Hiltermann identified four intersecting wars in Iraq: first, the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian conflict; second, the intra-Sunni conflict; third, the intra-Shi'a conflict; fourth, a potential Kurdish-Arab conflict. Dr Hiltermann turned to first to consider the Sunni-Shi'a conflict noting that the terms 'Sunni' and 'Shi'a' are difficult and more complex than they initially appear to be, especially given the frequency of mixed marriages in Iraq. The terms have been made meaningful by political actors with a vested interest in distinguishing between communities. The conflict over resources has encouraged the use of religious and ethnic markers to carve out communities. Dr Hiltermann suggested that, to a certain extent, the surge has kept this conflict on hold.

Dr Hiltermann turned to consider the intra-Sunni conflict, suggesting that there is evidence of some local tribal elements fighting back against Al-Qaeda/Jihadi elements and noting that the US is supporting and taking advantage of this situation. Although there is evidence of the situation in some of the provinces calming down, Dr Hiltermann suggested that this may well prove to be a relatively short-lived strategy especially given that tribal elements often do not get along and may be divided. Furthermore Dr Hiltermann noted that there has been no attempt to give these ad hoc alliances a political form and suggested that after the surge, these Sunni individuals may be overwhelmed by Al-Qaeda, flee into exile or find accommodation with Al-Qaeda in order to fight Iran.

Turning to consider the intra-Shi'a conflict, Dr Hiltermann noted that the 2003 war had unleashed the Shi'a underclass, displaced by persecution in previous eras. These people, mostly Shi'a from the south of Iraq, had fled and lived in slums for a long time but now they had been given an opportunity to escape this oppression. Dr Hiltermann suggested that the intra-Shi'a conflict was essentially one which centered on the class divide. While admitting that the enemies of the Shi'a underclass were numerous and diverse, including the US, the Sunnis and the Kurds, the speaker suggested that the real enemy of the Shi'a underclass was the Shi'a middle class, including the middle class elements of the Supreme Council.

The Kurdish-Arab conflict is as yet a potential conflict which may occur over contested borders from the Syrian border to the Iranian border, between which lies a region which is rich in oil.

What will the US do? Will it come up with a political strategy beyond working with the Iraqi government? What will Iraq's neighbours do? What will Saudi Arabia/Jordan/Iran do? Will they be dragged into Iraq?

Dr Hiltermann turned to consider the question of US/Iranian rivalry suggesting that it could be argued that US rivalry with Iran is both shaping and aggravating pre-existing conflicts in the region. The Arab world is frightened by this development and cannot isolate Iranians. The US needs to come to some kind of accommodation with Iran.

If the US bombs Iran, the domestic position of the Iranian regime would be strengthened, in that there would be a wave of nationalist support for the regime, despite its unpopularity in other respects. Secondly, Iran's potential to interfere in Iraq and to attack US forces would be greatly increased. Thirdly, there could be a nationalist response throughout the region leading to stronger anti-US sentiment on a regional level. Arguably, Al-Qaeda-type groups would be the main beneficiaries of such an attack because they will not be subject to any restraints. The speaker suggested that this was best demonstrated by the example of what happened after the Hizbullah victory in Lebanon. He suggested that, in a similar manner, it would be possible for Al-Qaeda-type groups to confront local authorities.

If Iraq does fall apart, then it is very difficult to predict what will happen. Dr Hiltermann suggested that it seemed that it might not be possible to solve the problems in Iraq and so it is more important to seek to contain them.

Questions:

What differentiates 'Al-Qaeda' from 'Al-Qaeda-types'?

This terminology reflects a change in the nature of the organization. In 2003, Al-Qaeda was seen as an organization composed of foreign jihadi fighters but this is a trail which has now largely dried up. Al-Qaeda type groups in Iraq have been 'Iraq-ified' and this has combined with their desire to be included in the Al-Qaeda franchise.

What is the likelihood of a dialogue between Iran and the US?

Britain seems willing to play a key role to this end. There has been some progress evidenced by high level meetings which have been held since the revolution but Dr Hiltermann suggested that perhaps there would not be much more progress while Dick

Cheney retained a key presence in the White House. There are some new problems on the horizon but common ground exists between Iraq and the US in so far as they do not want Iraq to fall apart and to avoid this, there will be no choice but for them to work together.

What is Turkey's view of the prospect of a divided Iraq?

Turkey does not want Iraq to be partitioned, but would like to continue having a dependent Iraqi Kurdish autonomous entity to act as a buffer to protect it from the rest Iraq. It looks like the planned Kirkuk referendum will not take place and the Kurds will be very upset by this given that they have been waiting for it since May 2005.

How might the analysis change if Israel was to launch an attack on Iran?

It would be very difficult to convince anyone that Israel would attack without a green light from Washington. The US does not want Israel to attack Iran but this may mean that the US will launch an attack themselves. Evidence that Israel has been trying to internationalise the issue of Iran suggests that the notion of an independent attack is extremely unlikely.

To what extent can Lebanon's political make-up be seen as a model for what could happen in Iraq?

Although civil war in Iraq may suggest parallels with Lebanon, the massive difference is, and will continue to be, the oil issue which compounds everything. There is some evidence that Hizbullah has started training 'southernist' elements in Iraq.

What is happening to the city of Baghdad?

It is possible to make maps of the neighborhoods in Baghdad based on fieldwork. Despite some mixed neighborhoods, Baghdad can be seen as a mosaic where people have started to consolidate themselves by community. It is possible to also see the shift towards intermingled enclaves that are internally consolidated. The present situation is quiet but not stable enough to allow for people to return to their districts of origin. Dr Hiltermann noted that practical difficulties mean that it is very difficult to gather information in Baghdad.

What is the impact of the Iraqi refugees on Syria?

Added pressure on Syria is viewed by the international community as a positive development in so far as it prevents the Syrians from being able to do much to help Hizbullah. It has recently become necessary for Iraqis to gain visas to enter Syria. The high rate of refugees has created some serious social problems for Syria such as the prostitution of young Iraqi girls. Dr Hiltermann suggested that Syria was likely to use the fact that it has helped Iraq to gain future leverage against the country.