

## Digging Deeper into the Mire

*Derek Woolner\**

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The issue of withdrawing troops from Iraq has flared once more in Australia and the United States. Strangely though, Prime Minister Howard's attack on US Democrats arguing for the withdrawal of US forces comes when events are heading in the opposite direction.

The debate over President George Bush's redirection of Iraq policy in January, the so-called 'surge' of US forces by 21,500, is mostly about whether it will achieve military success or failure. Yet the policy contains so many self-contradictions that it is likely to worsen the situation regardless of the efforts of American and Australian troops.

President Bush is usually wrong on Iraq—the weapons of mass destruction, the reduction of American troops to around 30,000 by about September 2003, the insurgency and civil war that were both denied. Throughout, violence has ground remorselessly upwards. In the last half of 2006 there were over 1,000 'terrorist' bombings—ten times the rate for all 2003. Yet, at the end of January Vice President Dick Cheney, who visits Canberra next week, could dismiss claims of failure and claim major gains 'on the ground'.

For the past year, the United States has been transfixed by violence wrought by the militias that are attached to most of the Shia religious parties, and which President Bush appears to believe are a cause, rather than a symptom, of the civil war that is re-drafting the Iraqi map along sectarian lines. The US military intends to use 17,500 of the additional troops to attack the Mahdi Army, at 60,000 the largest of these militias, in its stronghold of Sadr City—home to 2 million Shia.

The strength of the militias negates America's only strategy for defeating the Sunni insurgency, an elected government widely inclusive of Iraq's tribes and religions. Indeed, Lieutenant General Petraeus, the new commander of American forces in Iraq, has said the Bush plan will not succeed without national reconciliation. Yet America's chaotic imposition of democracy has unleashed a popular revolution amongst Iraq's Shi'ites and Kurds. Sectarian voting has given them power and neither intends to again suffer the oppression of the Sunni minority.

\* **Derek Woolner** is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. He was Director, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Group of the Information and Research Services in the Australian Commonwealth Parliament until January 2002. He led a group of 12-14 policy and information specialists in providing advice and information to all Senators and Members of the Parliament. He was a policy adviser to Defence Ministers Lance Barnard and Bill Morrison and over three decades provided advice to Senators, Members and Parliamentary committees on a wide range of defence and national security issues. From 2002 to 2004 he was Visiting Fellow at the Australian Defence Studies Centre of the Australian Defence Force Academy where he did extensive work on homeland security in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks. Derek Woolner is a graduate of the Joint Services Staff College.

After the 2005 elections the staunchly anti-American cleric Moktada al-Sadr, who commands the loyalty of the Mahdi Army, controlled the largest bloc within the Shi'ite majority and vetoed the selection of America's favoured candidate for Prime Minister in favour of Nuri al-Maliki. In October 2006, during the latest unsuccessful US campaign to pacify Baghdad, al-Maliki ordered the Americans to release Sheikh Mazen al-Saedi (an al-Sadr lieutenant) and thereafter forbade their entry to Sadr City. Most of the Iraqi divisions promised for the operation never materialised.

President Bush now says such factors explain the failure to control the Baghdad militias. Perhaps because of this, the Americans have been meddling in Iraqi politics to create a less 'sectarian' government. In December, Bush talked to both Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Shi'ite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and with Sunni Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi.

Bush's security adviser, Stephen Hadley, had suggested he assist the formation of an 'alternative political base' within the Iraqi parliament. The hope seemed to be that an alliance of some Shia and Kurdish parties, with moderate Sunnis, would coalesce behind al-Maliki who, thus freed from reliance on the Sadrist bloc, would acquiesce in an American attack on the Mahdi Army.

The internal contradictions of this brainstorm render its implementation more trouble than it is worth. In October, al-Hakim won a parliamentary vote to implement a Constitutional Provision allowing the formation of regional governments. These will control internal security and retain income from all future oil developments. al-Hashemi (like most Sunna) and the United States are opposed to the concept but the Constitution was passed by popular vote. Ironically, al-Sadr, who favours a nationalist central government, is opposed.

An American proposal to stiffen Iraqi forces in Baghdad by deploying a division of Pesh Merga risks corroding links between the Kurds and the Shia religious parties that have been one of the few supports of government. Moderate Sunni politicians are unlikely to bring themselves, let alone any strength, to support al-Maliki, as most have now fled to Jordan, Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States.

In any case, little will be gained by taking on the Mahdi Army, with or without the support of al-Maliki. American forces allocated are insufficient without at least four or five times the number of Iraqis. Past experience suggests these Shia-dominated units will only act, at the most, against recognised criminal elements in the Mahdi Army. The Mahdi are no minority, but a homogenous component of Sadr City's population. America's failure to control the Sunni insurgency means every car bombing of a Shia market increases the Mahdi's popular support.

In any case, the American plan is incoherent. The Mahdi are not confined to Baghdad—they operate in surrounding provinces and are particularly strong in Iraq's south. They have infiltrated police units in Basra Province, run by Fadhila, a party aligned to al-Sadr. With al-Maliki's connivance, many important Mahdi leaders already have traveled south.

In the southern provinces Britain is already ceding authority to Iraqi, a process it expects to complete by mid-year, only shortly after the US 'surge' reaches full effect. At that point, British forces will have been reduced by some 40 percent. The provisions of al-Hakim's law would allow the whole of southeastern Iraq to be under a regional government by about March 2008. Such a government could continue to ignore the activities of the Mahdi or legitimize it as the region's security force. No matter how well the United States does in Baghdad, the Mahdi Army will return by drawing on its southern support.

With little benefit, the risks of the revised American policy are critical. Sidelining Moktada al-Sadr would have consequences, but promoting reconciliation and reducing the power of the militias won't be among them. More likely, the already considerable influence of al-Hakim would be increased and the power of Badr, the SCIRI militia, entrenched. Smaller than the Mahdi, Badr has the conspiratorial organisation often successful in revolutionary situations. It secretly ran torture cells within the Interior Ministry's Jadriya prison and its Wolf Brigades, within the police commandos, are widely feared. A political re-balancing could well spark outright confrontation between Badr and the Mahdi. Violent competitors in southern Iraq, last October their followers fought a gun battle over two days in Amara.

Yet such circumstances would be part of a wider disaster. Two-thirds of Iraqis now think that violence against the occupying forces is acceptable. The restraint placed upon his Shia followers by the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has limited the bloodshed. Nonetheless, the ongoing violence has undermined al-Sistani's influence and the Ayatollah is aged and in poor health. Many Shia now accuse the United States of not focusing on the Sunni insurgency. By attempting to sideline al-Sadr and attacking his followers, Bush risks alienating the Shia community and creating the possibility of a nationwide insurgency against Coalition forces.

Fortunately, the Shia religious politicians are, for the most part, canny and disciplined. They are likely to heed al-Sistani's desire for moderation, choosing to delay and frustrate the Americans, knowing the occupation will change if no prominent Republican Presidential candidate is prepared to run on Administration policy.

Yet, given the ideological nature of the Bush presidency, Iraq seems doomed to the American's self-reinforcing spiral of incompetence over the next two years. Each descent into further disaster will become another argument why America and Australia cannot withdraw and will heighten the possibility of conflict with Iran. It is time to accept the advice of Sir Richard Dannatt, chief of the British Army, that foreign occupation 'exacerbates (Iraq's) security problems' and we should 'get ourselves out sometime soon'.