

Iraq spins out of our control

*Derek Woolner**

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A change of the political climate in the United States again has made Australia's military involvement in Iraq a topic of political and media debate. The political dynamics are similar to early 2004, when Opposition leader Mark Latham promised to remove the Australian contingent by Christmas. Kim Beazley has committed a future ALP government to withdraw military forces from Iraq with the exception of the Security Detachment that protects Embassy officials in Baghdad. The Government predicts disaster, were this to happen and the US Administration has again intervened in Australian politics against the ALP position.

Yet, as in 2004, the language of the political debate reflects little of what is happening in Iraq. Australia's politicians, as much as those in the United States and Great Britain, are arguing about the consequences of events over which they now have little control.

With elections not expected until the end of 2007, an Australian withdrawal could not begin until early 2008—say in about 15 months time. In early November 2006 General George Casey, Coalition commander in Iraq, said he expected Iraqi forces to take responsibility for security in 12 to 18 months. Australia has had little direct involvement in this role. al Muthanna, the initial base of the Army Task Force Group was the first province turned over to Iraqi government control in June this year. The Group remains in southern Iraq where the British are gradually returning other provinces to local control. There should, accordingly, be little controversial in the ALP's policy. In fact, if at the next election security in Iraqi continues to be tenuous, public antipathy towards Australia's military role may well become a critical issue.

John Howard, as an adept pragmatist, is already changing his presentation of Iraq policy. He now emphasises the consequences for America's international prestige and efforts to contain terrorism if it left Iraq in circumstances that appeared a 'defeat'. Yet events in Iraq now are driven by their own situational logic.

Two years ago I wrote (*Canberra Times*, 30 June 2004) that America's handling of the insurgency in Iraq had been so inept its only course was to accept 'what Iraqi politics throws up, and that may be unpalatable and may even involve civil conflict'. Just how unpalatable Iraqi politics could be was quickly apparent and by the following October (*Canberra Times*, 6 October 2005) I was arguing that their dynamics had effectively undermined the only strategy for a successful Coalition departure.

* **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.

This was the Bush Administration's argument that the insurgency could be defeated by establishing a unified national democratic government whose Coalition-trained security forces would increasingly take over the fight. Instead, the introduction of democracy has accomplished the transfer of power along sectarian lines. Under its spiritual leader, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, the cohesion of Iraq's majority Shia population delivered to the religious Shia parties and their Kurdish allies an effective majority in both the interim and the first permanent Iraqi governments.

During the interim government of 2005, the Shia and Kurds controlled the drafting of the new Constitution. Drawing on the Kurdish semi-autonomous zone (protected by the United States and Britain since the 1991 Gulf War), the Constitution allows the formation of autonomous regions through amalgamation of a number of provinces. These regions will be largely responsible for internal security and will control the revenue from new oil projects. Although bitterly opposed by the Sunni minority, the Constitution was adopted in a national plebiscite.

At the same time the Shia and Kurdish parties used control of government to infiltrate the national security forces with their militias. As militia attacks on Sunni communities increased so did accusations of involvement by the security forces. The effective seizure of power by the Shia religious parties and the Kurds was de facto a civil war waged against the Sunni through politics, with the US military underwriting the transfer of power.

This, of course, was not what the Americans had expected. Over the last year they have continued to pursue the goal of a national unity government and have continually urged the Government to reign-in militias. The United States has failed on both accounts. America urged Sunni participation in the elections of December 2005, thinking that this would dilute the influence of the religious Shia parties and hopeful a national unity government of secular leanings would result. It urged the Constitution be revised and the concept of regionalism abandoned.

Instead, power continues to lie with the religious Shia and Kurdish parties, the Sunni parties reduced to impotent walkouts on important issues. The Constitution has not been changed and, in October, the process for creating autonomous regions through local referenda became law. In a country where 40 percent of weddings were once between Sunni and Shia, politics now is not about the idealism of democracy but the practice of communal security.

Following the destruction of the Askariya mosque in Samara in February, communal violence has become civil war to all but the US military command. Attacks on Iraqis reached 40 a day in October, four times the rate of January. Around 150,000 Iraqis have become refugees in their own country. Both Shia and Sunni accuse the security forces of abduction, torture and murder. Citizens will not approach them for protection and turn to the militias instead. In a culture where guns are linked to masculinity and vendetta is an accepted practice, militia revenge attacks have become the response to an undiminished insurgency. Even Ayatollah Sistani admits that he can no longer control his followers.

The Coalition cannot alter this situation. For the last four months the US has moved forces to Baghdad in an attempt to dislodge sectarian militias. They have achieved no significant results. Only two of the promised six Iraq Army Divisions have deployed in Baghdad and some captured militia leaders have been released at the behest of the Iraqi Government. Angered that operations against the Shi'ite militias have been at the expense of sustained pressure on the Sunni insurgency, the Iraq Government is seeking greater control over the deployment of Coalition forces when the UN's rules of engagement expire on 31 December.

Certainly, the US strategy is ineffective. There were 108 attacks a day on Coalition forces in October, an increase of 160 percent since January. In June, the American command in Anbar Province, western stronghold of the insurgency, estimated it needed an additional Division (about 16,000 personnel) to control the situation. The US Commander in the Middle East, General John Abizaid, told Congress last week that the US could deploy an additional 20,000 personnel 'to achieve a temporary effect' but could not sustain them for long in Iraq. A Marine Expeditionary Unit of 2,200 will be sent to Anbar.

Would leaving Iraq in these circumstances amount to a 'defeat' of the United States? The situation won't be any better in 12 to 18 months and may be worse, if growing tensions between the major Shi'ite militias break into open conflict. The future of Iraq seems more likely to be as loosely linked communities with equally vital links to other regional nations—a trend already underway. To the extent that this enhances the influence of Iran and Syria it will reduce America's international prestige and the next US administration will have to overcome that.

There is a vigorous debate over whether a Coalition withdrawal from Iraq would invigorate global terrorism or the western campaign against it. America's apparent inability to leave Iraq seems as inspiring to Islamist extremists as the prospect of its expulsion. On balance, Iraq seems more likely to be remembered as the Norwegian campaign of the 'war against terror'. This Second World War disaster was a strategic error compounded by tactical incompetence. At least it brought Winston Churchill to power. The West has not yet been so lucky with Iraq.