

Indecision on Iraq?

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | October 18, 2004

As the first half of October 2004 slips into history, Iraq presents a bewildering kaleidoscope of conflicting tactics both within and outside the country.

(1) Ongoing negotiations between U.S. and Iraqi interim government representatives and prominent Sunnis from Fallujah were buoyed by reports of a rift between “nationalist” insurgents and foreign “jihadists.” But on October 13, two days before Islam’s holy month of Ramadan began, a four-day lull in U.S. air strikes on Fallujah ended.

Then on October 14, interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi issued an ultimatum to the Fallujah leaders demanding they surrender Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Negotiations, which were slowed by the resumption of the bombing, ground to a halt. U.S. and Iraqi government forces launched a large but limited probe into Fallujah, a move that, together with continued bombing as Ramadan starts, risks new accusations that the U.S. is warring on Islam—exactly what could drive Fallujah’s leaders and Iraqi “nationalists” back toward the foreigners. (In contrast, President Clinton in 1998 ended the four-day bombing campaign called Operation Desert Fox just before Ramadan began.)

(2) A week-long “money-for-weapons” drive by U.S. forces in Baghdad’s Sadr City has yielded some old machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. Should U.S. commanders regard the lackluster response as violating pledges that the Mahdi Army would surrender its weapons and disperse, threatened house-to-house searches may resume, which will inevitably increase the violence.

But this threat seems to be undercut by U.S. media reports suggesting that the White House will not approve large-scale ground combat in urban areas, including Baghdad, for the next three weeks, ostensibly to avoid large numbers of Iraqi civilian and coalition casualties. Regardless, more than “money-for-weapons” is needed in Sadr city and other urban poor areas.

(3) The 57 nations and groups at the Tokyo donors’ summit are under U.S. pressure to shake loose more of the \$13.5 billion they pledged last year in Madrid for Iraqi reconstruction. Only one billion, from the World Bank, of the \$13.5 billion has been committed (Washington has spent just \$1.3 billion of its \$18.6 billion pledge) as

donors are reluctant to pour money into a still turbulent Iraq. Moreover, most are not obligated to meet their commitment until 2007.

While pressuring others to speed reconstruction money to Iraq, the White House asked and Congress approved shifting \$3.5 billion earmarked for Iraq’s reconstruction to security and quick job-creation projects. Unless these funds are restored—e.g., from an expected \$50 billion supplemental spending bill in early 2005—electricity, sanitation, and fresh water improvements will be severely cut from original projections.

(4) NATO’s role in Iraq was a major topic at a defense ministerial meeting in mid-October in Romania, where Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld pressed other NATO defense chiefs to speed construction and staffing of a facility outside Baghdad to train new recruits for Iraq’s army.

Crossed signals predominated on troop contributions. Germany’s defense minister seemed to open the cooperative door just a crack in hinting that Berlin might send troops to Iraq if conditions on the ground change. Berlin then said “no troops.” (Currently a donor nation, Germany also trains Iraqis in the United Arab Emirates and in Germany.) Before the Romanian meeting, Poland, with the third-largest contingent in Iraq, had said it planned on withdrawing its forces by the end of 2005. But government spokespersons in Prague then said there were no plans to leave Iraq by any specific date. Australia was unambiguous: its 900 troops would stay.

(5) October also saw serious erosion on the “why the U.S. invaded Iraq” question. Charles Duelfer, head of the Iraq Survey Group that scoured Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction and associated equipment, documents, components, stockpiles, and personnel, essentially came up empty-handed. His final report, delivered in early October to Congress, said that Saddam Hussein had no weapons, no stockpiles, and no active programs outside of missile development after 1996. All that remained of Saddam’s effort were people and a stated “intent” to restart programs when sanctions were lifted and inspectors departed.



John Scarlet, head of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), formally withdrew the "evidence" on which Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed that Saddam Hussein could deploy weapons of mass destruction in 45 minutes—a claim reiterated September 26, 2002 by President Bush during a meeting with members of Congress. Scarlet's retraction was forecast in July in Lord Butler's report on UK pre-war intelligence mistakes.

Nonetheless, President Bush still says he would have invaded Iraq even if he knew then (March 2003) what he knows now.

(6) On October 11, Congress passed the \$447 billion Fiscal Year 2005 Defense Authorization Act.

A week earlier, the Pentagon said it still needed 8,100 more armored Humvee vehicles for U.S. and Iraqi security personnel—an increase of 3,700 from June 2004. The shortages have persisted despite the one billion dollars Congress has provided for this purpose since April 2003.

All the above only opens new questions:

Can the negotiators in Fallujah and Sadr City actually deliver, or will there be renewed ground assaults with high casualties and new insurgents between now and January 2005 when Iraqis have their first election? (Fallujah negotiators, for example, claim that al-Zarqawi is the latest version of the U.S. pre-war assertion about weapons of mass destruction—neither exist where Washington puts them.)

As happened in the opening days of the U.S.-led invasion in March 2003 when the Iraqi army buried weapons and ammunition across the country and melted away, have Mahdi Army followers of Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-

Sadr melted back into the population—taking much of their weaponry with them?

Will training of Iraqi troops and police accelerate, improving security so that donor nations become more willing to allocate funds for reconstruction projects and for job creation efforts? Or will Ramadan see another month of increased attacks by insurgents and foreign fighters—and higher casualties?

Will the coalition continue to unravel or will it get a fresh infusion of NATO or other troops?

With the main reasons for going to war in March 2003 now debunked by Duelfer and Scarlet, can the public trust the intelligence used to "target" insurgents and announcements by U.S. spokespersons that only "insurgents" were killed?

What can be said for sure about Iraq nineteen months after the U.S.-led invasion is that the fog of war, as thick as ever, has merged with the equally unpredictable fog of politics in the U.S., Iraq, a growing number of NATO countries, and countries in the Gulf region. Lacking a comprehensive regional and global strategy (which counterterrorism is not) that promotes process over specific outcomes, those charged with implementing policy risk losing all sense of tactical direction. And this in turn inevitably undermines the international cohesion essential for managing global economic, political, and security ills.

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