

The SWISH Report (5)

Paul Rogers

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An independent consultancy assesses al-Qaida's prospects for 2006 and beyond.

A third report from the South Waziristan Institute of Strategic Hermeneutics to the al-Qaida Strategic Planning Cell on the progress of the campaign.

Introduction

In the early part of 2004 you commissioned us to undertake an independent analysis of the progress of your campaign. We reported back to you on 15 July 2004 and were subsequently asked to complete a further assessment that was presented to you on 13 January 2005. You have now asked us to report further and we are gratified that you find our work of use.

We are particularly pleased that you have sufficient confidence in us, bearing in mind that we have since completed reports on a similar theme for the International Security Policy Group attached to the prime minister's office at 10 Downing Street, London (19 May 2005) and the Strategic Advisory Group at the United States state department in Washington (1 September 2005).

We are reassured that you recognise that we will work for anyone, while endeavouring to be independent in our analysis. We are, after all, consultants.

We understand that our reports for the British and American government departments have entered the

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public domain, as we are sure will this one. We therefore assume that you have had sight of these documents and will have seen that we have endeavoured to analyse the developing situation in a detached and intelligent manner. We also assume that you will recognise that our advice to these clients is highly unlikely to have had any impact whatsoever.

Our main purpose in this third survey is to review the current situation, assess the significance of the main events of the past twelve months and advise you on the prospects for your movement over the next year, with some consideration of longer-term developments. In doing so we will very briefly recap on your aims, and on the conclusions of our earlier reports to you.

Al-Qaida aims

Your short-term aims comprise:

- removal of foreign forces of occupation from the Islamic world
- termination of the House of Saud as the corrupt, elitist, pro-western and illegitimate Keeper of the Two Holy Places
- termination of other elitist, pro-western and un-Islamic regimes in the region, especially those in

Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and the western Gulf emirates and kingdoms

- re-establishment of appropriately Islamist governance in Afghanistan
- establishment of an independent Palestine that might involve the termination of the state of Israel
- support for separatist or oppositional Islamic movements in places outside the region, such as Chechnya and southern Thailand.

Although some success has been achieved in evicting United States military (but not civilian) forces from Saudi Arabia, we recognise that these short-term aims are measured in one to two decades rather than merely in years.

Your longer-term aim, in the context of which these are mere preliminaries, is the re-establishment of a region-wide caliphate as a prelude to worldwide progress. The caliphate may take between fifty and a hundred years to achieve, and the longer-term aim may best be measured in centuries. We recognise that such timescales are entirely different to those on which the United States (your far enemy) is basing its "war on terror", and we continue to regard this as one of your greatest advantages.

Earlier conclusions

In our first report we made the point that your aim of involving the United States in a major ground offensive in Afghanistan failed. Instead of terminating your hosts (the Taliban regime) by direct military action, the United States did so by a combination of air power, special forces and especially the rearming of the Northern Alliance. This meant that you and your Taliban associates failed to engage US forces in a long-term guerrilla war as your predecessors had done in the 1980s.

At the same time we saw the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime and subsequent occupation in Iraq as a far more positive outcome for you, given that here was the historic seat of the Abbasid caliphate now occupied by a neo-Christian/Zionist coalition, a recruiting focus for your movement that could scarcely be bettered.

We pointed also to continuing instability in Afghanistan, if not a full-scale insurgency, and to the continuing political uncertainties in Pakistan. At the

time of that report, your various associates had not been hugely prominent in attacks against the near and far enemies outside Iraq and Afghanistan, but we believed that your long-term prospects were still good. We placed a particular focus on Iraq and Israel/Palestine and saw two major trends in the United States as of advantage to you.

The first was the rise of Christian Zionism and its informal yet substantial links with neo-conservatism, implying a continuing pro-Zionist and anti-Islamic stance. This would imply a clear lack of support for any serious peace settlement between Israel and Palestine, an outcome that would not be helpful to you.

The second was the long-term importance of Gulf oil security, making that region of unparalleled significance to the United States, both in terms of its own oil dependency as well as its developing rivalry with China. We saw, in particular, that the United States was likely to maintain a permanent military presence in Iraq, providing a remarkable long-term focus for your movement.

However, our most significant conclusion was that the position of your movement was relatively strong, but that this was very largely due to the incompetence and shortsighted policies of the United States. Your greatest risk was that the US would rethink its regional security policies together with its military posture in such a manner as to undercut your support.

While we did not conclude that this was likely, we reminded you that your achievements to date had more to do with the misguided and deeply counterproductive policies of your opponents than with the prowess of your movement. We therefore cautioned strongly against arrogance.

In our current assessment we intend to examine particular theatres of operations and contexts in assessing the developments of the past year and your prospects for the future.

The United States

Given that the best hope for the advancement of your movement comes from a belligerent, aggressive and determined administration in Washington, the re-election of George W Bush in November 2004 was very positive news indeed. At a conservative estimate, at least 35,000 civilians have been killed by the US in the pursuit of its war on terror, 70,000 have been detained

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without trial, torture, humiliation and harassment of detainees are all commonplace, and rendition is an embedded policy.

We find this last policy, rendition, quite extraordinary. We would have thought that any CIA analyst with even a vague degree of competence would have recognised that much of the anger that drives your supporters comes from their hatred of the elitist Arab regimes that are so close to the west, yet they persist in delivering up "suspects" to such people.

At the same time, while the war on terror continues to enhance support for your movement, we would point to two aspects that should cause you concern.

The first is the growth of opposition within the United States to the Iraq war, especially with that conflict about to enter its fourth year. There are now serious calls for a US "draw down" or even a wholesale withdrawal of troops from Iraq. This would be a disaster for your movement. Fortunately, for reasons given in our previous report, we do not expect anything more than a modest withdrawal of a few thousand troops in time for November 2006's congressional elections. Our concern is that the changing mood in the United States over the past six months has made this a political necessity and might develop into a more sustained anti-war movement.

The second aspect is the slow but developing recognition that your movement is not one of "mad radicals" but has distinct aims and strategies. You should be particularly concerned that the writings of your leader have now been translated and published in the United States and elsewhere. This means that the analyses of your movement by some of the sharper western academics are now proving more acceptable as a wider range of readers are able to experience your leader's thoughts firsthand.

Nevertheless, for reasons we will now discuss, we believe your prospects remain good.

Iraq

The insurgency in Iraq continues, virtually unaffected by political developments, and we do not see any major change that could disadvantage you. Indeed, the current trend in the US military's counterinsurgency operations is to make a much greater use of airpower, with gunship and strike aircraft operations now happening several times a day.

As this tactic is used more progressively, so civilian casualties ("collateral damage") will increase. As now, this will be widely reported across the region and beyond, both by the conventional media and by the

DVD, video and web output of your many associates. This will enhance support for your movement and its wider aims.

We are particularly interested in the manner in which Iraq has replaced the Afghanistan of two decades ago as a combat training zone for your movement's supporters, attracting recruits from across north Africa, the middle east and even Afghanistan. We expect this to continue and to expand to include a generation of paramilitaries drawn increasingly from supportive communities across the wider world. We note the concern of the Saudi security authorities and their determination to use harsh measures to control this, but doubt that they will succeed.

We recognise, however, that you face a dilemma in Iraq in that you seek the expulsion of what you term crusader forces while finding them useful in providing the urban combat-training environment that could serve you so well in the coming decades.

There is a particular difficulty in that the majority of Iraqi insurgents do not have this long-term aim – they just want the occupiers out. Fortunately for you, it is highly unlikely that they will succeed in ousting the Americans and their allies, given the oil motive analysed in our last report. We therefore see the Iraq Combat Training Zone (ITCZ) as a long-term environment and we expect you to pay this far more attention in the coming years. We would expect, in particular, that you will make it a priority to encourage young recruits from outside the region to engage in active combat training there.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

One of the most remarkable developments of the past year has, we must confess, caught us by surprise, despite our institute's geographical proximity to Afghanistan. This is the manner in which paramilitaries move regularly from Afghanistan to Iraq for combat training, returning with additional experience and technologies. This may be the first substantive example of Iraq's developing role in your longer-term activities.

More generally, it is now clear that the activities of the Taliban, your own paramilitaries and other groups are growing in intensity, with this being the first winter for four years that the insurgency has continued unabated rather than being a seasonal phenomenon. Given the desire of the US forces to reduce their combat-troop numbers, we expect even greater pressure on their Nato associates to fill the gap. We note the British decision, announced in late January 2006, to expand its forces in Afghanistan, and we expect you to use your

influence to concentrate paramilitary actions on the British, German and other European units now present in the country.

This could have substantial political consequences across Europe, not least in Britain where opposition to the Iraq involvement may be hardened by an appearance of being sucked into US activities in Afghanistan. Our point here is that the current International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) security force in Afghanistan is not a counterinsurgency force but is likely to become so, at the express wish of the Bush administration. It is the realisation of this that will, we anticipate, have the political impact in Europe.

We note also the manner in which the Pakistani army has become even less effective in the districts bordering Afghanistan, not least here in South Waziristan. This has, in turn, increased the tendency for the CIA to use armed drones for assassination missions into the region.

We expect these to continue as US frustration at Pakistani army performance increases. This will, in our view, further alienate opinion from a substantial section of the Pakistani population. It is at least possible that this could contribute to political destabilisation in the country, to your substantial advantage.

The wider movement

When writing our second report a year ago, we were aware that your wider movement was not overly active. Since then, the situation has changed, as evidenced in the London bombings, the attacks at Taba and Sharm al-Sheikh in Sinai, and at Aqaba and Amman in Jordan.

The Jordanian bombings were significant in two respects: associates of your movement were able to fire Katyusha rockets at a large US warship in what the US navy believed was one of the few safe port locations in the entire region; and the Amman bombings involved Iraqi associates. Both factors demonstrated that Jordan's much-vaunted security services were less than effective.

Similarly, the real significance of the London attacks was that the British security forces had virtually no idea that young paramilitaries were active who had had few associations with your wider movement. This suggests that your movement is, either directly or indirectly, evolving in new directions.

It also demonstrates that the wider global movement of parallel groups, together with your looser associates, have lost little of their potential. This is in spite of tens of thousands of detentions, the application of numerous new laws on scores of countries, and the death or detention of substantial elements of your leadership. This bodes well for your future and much less well for the US war on terror.

Your leader's most recent pronouncement offered both a "truce" and a further attack on your far enemy. We presume the truce idea was aimed at disaffected Americans as it will have no effect on the leadership.

We note that you have, in the past, given advance warning of attacks. It is not possible to say what would be the political impact of another attack on the scale of, or larger than, 9/11. It could either produce a strong political reaction against the Bush administration, pointing to the futility of its current conduct in making America safe, or it could be used as a rallying-call for an even tougher response.

No doubt your intention would be to encourage the latter, given that you do not want any kind of US disengagement from current policies. On balance we expect that this would be the effect, but we are not sure. We suspect that opinion in the United States is rather more fluid than you might expect. If you wish to commission further work in this respect we would be happy to oblige in association with our Washington office.

Iran

You might find it a surprise but we would like to extend this report to cover current circumstances and likely developments in relation to Iran and its putative nuclear-weapons programme. We recognise that while Iranians may externally be considered co-religionists, your associates may regard them as apostate. Nevertheless, impending circumstances may make events in Iran highly relevant to your endeavours.

In our considered view, there is now a strong probability (not possibility) of an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities from Israel or the United States during the course of 2006. Many analysts argue that this will actually be an issue for the incoming US president in 2008-09.

We disagree. The current Iranian regime knows full well that it has all the advantages, especially in terms of potential involvements in the Iraqi insurgency and

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essential for Iran to develop nuclear weapons and would even welcome a confrontation. We believe there is a risk of a rapid escalation of a crisis as it becomes obvious that – as the United Nations Security Council will not approve harsh sanctions no form of "soft power" will work – the United States will be left with no other effective options.

As we do not believe the current US administration is capable of creative diplomatic negotiations with Iraq, we expect a crisis culminating in military action. We accept we may be wrong on this but believe you plan on this assumption.

We further expect that a military strike will be followed by Iranian counter-actions including withdrawal from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, actions against Gulf oil exports and direct involvement in the Iraq insurgency. There will also be immediate attempts at reconstituting a dispersed, heavily protected and robust nuclear-weapons programme, with this leading to further military action by the United States or Israel.

None of this is hugely relevant to your own aims and expectations, but we also anticipate a major antagonistic reaction to United States (or Israeli) violence among Islamic communities across the region and beyond, whatever their confessional orientations within Islam.

In order to maximise the impact of this in terms of increasing support for your actions against the far enemy, we would recommend that you endeavour to ensure that your movement and its many associates minimise their hostility to *Shi'a* Islam, especially in Iraq during the coming months. This may be difficult but it should still be attempted, even if it is a matter of short-term expediency rather than a longer-term change of orientation.

Conclusion

From what we have said in this document, you may well conclude that you are in a favourable position, especially as you are working to a timescale that is much longer than that of your far enemy. That is a fair reflection of our current assessment, but we would insert two caveats, even at the risk of some repetition.

The first is that your success so far is due substantially to the quite remarkable incompetence of your opponents, especially the United States and its closest ally, Britain.

The second is that this may not last. With a change of leadership due in both the United States and Britain within the next three years, it is by no means impossible that there could be a major rethinking of policy options. We do not think that your position is anything like as strong as you may feel, and we would here point once again to the more volatile political mood that has developed in the United States over the past twelve months.

The greatest risk to your movement is that the opinions of some of the sharper analysts on both sides of the Atlantic begin to transcend those of the political and religious fundamentalists that currently dominate the scene. If that were to happen, then you could be in serious trouble within two or three years. We accept that we are by no means certain that this will occur, but we have to say that the situation is rather more fluid than when we last reported to you.

We therefore recommend that you set up a policy group specifically tasked with planning for the worst-case scenario – namely that your far enemy at last begins to recognise your vulnerabilities. We will, needless to say, be more than ready to assist in this process.

Wana, South Waziristan, 2 February 2006

*Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University and is [openDemocracy's](#) International Security Editor. A consultant to the Oxford Research Group, the second edition of his book *Losing Control* has just been published by Pluto Press.*

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