Crisis in Iraq:

Assessments and Implications (Part II)

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Brief Analysis

On April 16, 2004, Michael Eisenstadt, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum, along with Jeffrey White and Michael Knights. The following is a summary of Mr. Eisenstadt's remarks. **Read a summary (templateC05.php?CID=1739)** of Jeffrey White and Michael Knights's remarks.

Recent U.S. confrontations with insurgents in Fallujah and with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in the south have exposed a number of U.S. misconceptions regarding the Iraqi political-military environment. These two militant challenges to the long-term stability of Iraq have necessitated a change in approach on the part of the coalition. The fighting has also provided early indications of unanticipated complexity in the operating environment leading up to (and following) the June 30 transfer of sovereignty.

Lessons Learned

The United States underestimated the troublemaking potential of its enemies in Iraq, the constraints on its military freedom of action, and the dangers -- potential and actual -- of resorting to force under the current circumstances. These dangers include strengthening al-Sadr's popular standing, further discrediting members of the Iraqi Governance Council, and, most important, alienating large parts of the Iraqi population. Such consequences point to a failure by U.S. officials to fully comprehend either Iraqi political dynamics or the mood on the street.

This lack of understanding may be due to the relative isolation of coalition officials and their lack of interaction with broad segments of Iraqi society, but it may also be attributable to the bifurcation of the political and military arms of the occupation: the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Combined Joint Task Force 7 (CJTF-7), respectively. Communication and coordination between the CPA and CJTF-7 has never been substantial. It sometimes seems as if subordinate units of CJTF-7 work without a solid grasp of the broader political context in which they are operating, or of the limits of military power under the current circumstances. CJTF-7's response to the challenges posed by Fallujah and al-Sadr's militia are cases in point (See **PolicyWatch no. 861 (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch2004/861.htm)**).

Neither the unrest in the Sunni triangle nor the challenge posed by al-Sadr is amenable to a military solution, nor is

the coalition free to use force as it wishes. Addressing both challenges will require patience, perseverance, and the adroit use of political, economic, and military levers by the coalition and by the Iraqi interim authority that takes over on June 30. The key to success is ensuring that the maximum number of Iraqis have a stake in the new political order, while marginalizing political and religious extremists by peaceful means whenever possible -- using force only when necessary.

Fallujah is an extreme manifestation of the problem the coalition faces in dealing with former regime elements and religious extremists (local and foreign) throughout much of the Sunni triangle. Capturing, disarming, or killing identifiable insurgents, while offering generous financial inducements to the general population in order to win their cooperation are necessary components of the counterinsurgency effort, but they will not expunge the attitudes, ideologies, or political conditions that gave rise to the insurgency. This problem requires a political solution, which the U.S. military cannot deliver.

Likewise, capturing or killing al-Sadr (the declared U.S. objective) will not halt the activities of the clerical network he inherited from his late father -- a network that fulfills a variety of communal and social-welfare functions. Nor will these measures put an end to the phenomenon of "Sadrism," which taps into Shi'i grievances against the United States (including its failure to protect them after encouraging the Shi'i to revolt in 1991, and its failure to provide personal and economic security after the fall of Saddam Husayn), as well as a tradition of religious activism that appeals to a segment of the Shi'i community. Disarming al-Sadr's Mahdi Army is not a viable option at this time, although the coalition -- or better yet, Iraqis -- can at least insist that militia members not bear arms in public.

Al-Sadr can, however, be marginalized. His following is relatively small, and he is reviled by broad sectors of the Shi'i public and the community's clerical leadership. It should be possible to discredit him by emphasizing his reliance on funding from clerical networks in Iran (exposing the lie of al-Sadr's own nativist rhetoric and appealing to the Iraqi nationalism of many Shi'is). His role in the April 2003 murder of moderate Shi'i cleric Abd al-Majid Khoe'i and the thuggish exploits of al-Sadr's followers should also be publicized. All of this would best be done by Iraqis.

Toward the Transition

In the period leading up to and following the June 30 power transfer, coalition military forces will likely face increasingly difficult circumstances:

• A push by the Iraqi interim authority for a significant decisionmaking role in security matters, further curbing the coalition's military freedom of action. Average Iraqis are likely to bridle against what looks like an open-ended occupation and heavy-handed coalition tactics. Populist Iraqi politicians will likely exploit this discontent for political gain.

• An increase in insurgent activity. Insurgent groups and radical populist politicians want to underscore the fact that the occupation continues by keeping coalition forces involved in providing security, thereby fomenting an anti-coalition backlash and enhancing the ability to recruit new adherents.

• Reduced economic activity caused by the deteriorating security situation. Businesses shut down following outbreaks of violence, reconstruction projects are slowed or halted, foreign contractors quit or are withdrawn by their employers, and foreign lenders and investors shun Iraq. This progression is likely to feed anti-coalition sentiment and further discourage cooperation with coalition forces.

• Difficulty in obtaining accurate, timely intelligence. The security environment and uncertainty about the future is liable to discourage many Iraqis, including security personnel, from cooperating with the coalition. The Iraqi interim authority and the subsequent elected government will likely inherit the Sunni triangle insurgency, the al-Sadr problem, and the challenge of disarming the country's various militias. These challenges will stress the fragile institutions of the nascent government, test the new Iraqi security forces, and complicate the transition from

dictatorship to democracy in Iraq. On the other hand, the very weakness of the new government may compel it to eschew the use of force and seek political solutions to the country's problems whenever feasible. This would be a novel and welcome development for Iraq. Implications Successfully rebuilding Iraq will ultimately require the creation of a legitimate, representative, and effective new government. This is a necessary condition for the achievement of several key objectives: successfully dealing with insurgents and political extremists, who will no longer be able to claim that they are fighting foreign occupiers and infidels; rebuilding Iraq's security forces, which are more likely to hold together if ordered into action by a legitimate Iraqi government (instead of by foreigners); and attracting foreign lenders and investors, who are awaiting the restoration of security and the formation of a new Iraqi government before putting their money on the line. Coalition military actions should be evaluated by how they will affect these overriding objectives. While the use of force against insurgents and extremists will remain necessary for the foreseeable future, the resort to force must be selective, implemented with great care and precision and with an eye toward minimizing political collateral damage.

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